

ALLHALLOWS: a poetry residency

by Arji Manuelpillai

FOREWORD FROM THE POET

When I was first asked by INN CROWD to be a part of this remote residency I had no idea how fruitful it would be. Over November 2020 I spoke to 15 residents from the village of Allhallows. Each resident spent 30 minutes on the phone speaking to me about everything from forgotten shops to people and historical events. I was overwhelmed by stories and myths, by characters and tales, it was my job to turn them into this book. As a poet, I am not so interested in the historical facts and dates. I'm more interested in the tiny moments, the stories, the myths that capture some of the nuances of Allhallows and its people.

Throughout the conversations I found community was central to all residents. Some fear the changes of the coming years, others are excited about them but every single resident spoke to me of how thankful they were to have friends close-by, how important it was to have connections with each other during this uncertain time. I could really relate to this specially because I too was experiencing lockdown. The act of picking up the phone and talking to strangers felt powerful, radical and filled with hope. For that reason, I feel so privileged to have learnt so much about Allhallows without ever visiting the village.

The poems are broken into a range of themes. Some are concerned with events; the snow storm, the airshow in Southend, the Beast from the East and Christmas. Others are inspired by places: The Rose and Crown, Slough Fort and Directions. Then there are a few which depict characters; a horse, a metal detectorist, a litter picker and a father who never spoke about the war. Each of them came from conversations that I am entirely grateful for.

Thanks so much to Pat, Heather, Carol, Mick, Vicky, Edna, Glenda, Rodney, Angela, Phil, Pauline, Daphne, Millie and Julie. And an extra special thanks to Mark Skudder who connected me with so many interesting people.

DIRECTIONS

Just go straight up till you pass the water tower, where the sky drops its undercarriage on the grass, and the sea flickers like a lens caught in the sun, go past the slabs of barn, the purple hyacinths, the birds'll line the telegraph wires like notes, make sure to whistle that anthem. Keep straight as the buildings unfold, an open pop-up book, weather vane spinning like it's excited to see you, the church, the milkman's van, the post office where mum would get her family allowance. Keep going past the road sweeper's kingdom, we'd play knock-down-ginger on the red one, the pebbledash one, the haunted thatch, there! along the beach where the coal-man once stood, where the guy made perfume scent from petals, on a clear day you can see land on either side: Southend, Sheerness, the mouth of the world. That's where Mum and Dad would sit with a pint, watching boats sail by, making this place my home.

ALLHALLOWS

*(this poem uses comments posted by residents
in the Facebook community group)*

It's where the estuary meets the sea, a special kind of place,
skies too vast for painting, swallows too strong for breeze,
this refuge from the city life, a hopeful haven for a break,
flailing kids in breaking waves, picnic baskets on the beaches.
It was a bolt hole for the Krays, a pit stop for a soldier,
a walk with my old granny and romance for the wife.
It's a hang-out for my mates and a cuckoo at my shoulder,
where dreamers once escaped to discover a better life.
It's The Rose and Crown, Slough Fort, mornings in the church,
it's Harpers and the Co-op too, the baker's breaded scent,
It's the holiday park, the hotel, the places that we work,
the secret place for a quiet coffee huddled with a friend.
Because a place is only worth the friends who make it home,
the friends who weave community, so no one feels alone.

A PILE OF POLYSTYRENE

It appears like the remnants of a bad relationship,
on the beach, all elbow nudge, *what brings you here?*
you know, a man so wonderful he could be a Hotpoint:
stylish, new age, designed to make your life easier,
good enough to get naked on the first date, lay hopeful
between his shoulder blades, the whole world's pristine
until it isn't, *We want different things*, he says and snap,
the dog wanders off and you spot it twinkling in the sun,
white as Wrigley's sugar-free gum, waving cooey! Look!
Wheelieing like a windswept house of cards, it's a mess,
crumbling into flakes that cover the sand in pebbledash.
You're journeying to the beach, 7am with a picker-upper,
a black bag, rubber gloves and a bunch of best friends,
all trying to help you forget a washing machine ever existed.

THE SLOUGH FORT

It's a brand new fort, Slough fort, 1867 fort, the muddy, Godforsaken, arse-end of *honey I'm working on that fort* fort, the fodder-full lookout *to scare off the French!* fort, a hundred shells lined up like a giant's broken fingers, an operational fort, never *really worked out why they built it* fort, Britain's smallest fort, SOLD, the Lionman's lion's den, the raw meat on pitchfork, the *oooooh look at him yawning!* The tourist trap the army want back, the rifle breech, artillery dumping ground, *what the hell is this place?* It's the 1938 fort, the birds-eye sniper spot, the empty command post where lieutenant Richards once saw a fox rip a heron's neck clean off, the London guard, *if the Germans come, self-destruct the fort*, the final frontier, Thames protector, the end-of-war-party fort, *couple more beers in the basement* fort, CLOSED fort, empty fort, a candlelit *hold me, it's freezing* fort, took your virginity fort, first cig, first kiss, first punch in the nose, elbow to the head screaming *ghost* fort, a caravan park, waste of space fort, *too expensive to knock down* fort, a dinner yarn, *what is this place?* It's The Slough Fort. It's Mick and Mark's Winter project, a regenerated landmark, historical 5 star highlight, a community banding together, this reason for monthly meet ups is more than just a fort, it's Allhallows, past, present, everything in between. It's a school trip where a kid asks *who really cares about a D-shaped hell-hole in the middle of nowhere?* And the guide says, *everyone... and no one you've heard of.*

TREASURE HUNTER

a man with more pockets than things
listens intently to a levitating stick
more than he listens to his wife because
an Edward II coin was found in the estuary
and he wants his good side in The Gazette.

while his wife is talking new bathrooms
he dreams of nothing but coins raining
rounds of applause, free pints, you can
hear him prepping like you might hear
something coming over a mountain

Something in the early hours, lunchbox
bald fizz, sun-up, birds like pubic hairs
Something hangs in waiting, close, closer
a bottle top blips, a handle of a spade,
Something's snatching at him, he is a speck

up the rocky end of a beach, where the tide
is a Something pulling his knuckles white,
where the water is higher than a man
scrambling, reaching from the clouds,
as big a Something as you have ever seen.

it won't let him go, plucks at him, until
he plummets from the rock face - gone.
A metal detector left balancing where
he once stood, blipping like it found
something.

WAR IS A DIRTY WORD

the sea shifts
as a thousand
soldiers lying
face down.

the family are here
hands clasped
eyes spread
like lighthouses.

tying ropes
to their waists,
in knots big
as black clouds.

and there,
my father,
a spot in the distance
laughing as he drifts
away

MARY MCCULLOCH OF THE ROSE AND CROWN

She was the rose in the Rose and Crown,
in a pub that was more than just a pub,
back when the stools were topped by friends
and the pumps pumped casks of love.

She'd be propped up regal on the bar,
spinning yarns or a line of funny jokes.
Our tummies ached, we'd laugh so hard;
it was Mary who gave us hope.

Or Brickie spouting out, George f'n' blinding,
Uncle walks in, finds the whole thing quite exciting.
Someone asks Mary if she wants another coke.
She smiles, reveals a hip-flask hidden in her coat

and as the night draws empty, orders been and gone.
There would always be the time to sing another song
of Danny Boy, the pipes and how all things will end:
The Rose and Crown, Mary, good Allhallows' friends.

BEAST FROM THE EAST

It is crazy,
the road's knee deep,
snowmen drowning in the driveway,
a bird prints victory signs on a roof top,
a car is a shipwreck sunk,
no one can go outside,
it's a quiet chaos,
a tree shrugging a snow-shower onto a reporter:
she's wrapped up like an earwig.
They're doing a story
on Allhallows.
Perhaps we should offer a cuppa,
invite them in, feed them,
we could do an interview,
be on the telly,
or perhaps,
we should draw the curtains;
we don't want them to see the fireplace,
nor the smile on your face
as you pour me
another glass of Prosecco.

FOR THE GIANTS THAT CAME BEFORE

before the BP oil refinery was a BP oil refinery,
it was a dream in a gold rush of carts and cars

horses tied to bell tents, caravans, trucks yanked
by a herd of fathers bigger than their boots.

Those fathers gripped by mothers hurl belongings
heavy as backache, plates, woolies, jewellery

stories in their trails, trampled in the sand.
I can only just recall their faces, distressed leather,

coal-thick stretch marks across their temples,
rat snakes curling into slumber below the eyes

and that stench of progress, hot currents of it.
Look, how their bodies cluster, forearms raised

tightening, interlinked to form a staircase,
and here we come, us kids, up on their shoulders,

footprints on the backs of their hands, elbows,
a faint groan, a bellowed voice of encouragement,

the higher we go, the more they bow their heads,
as if looking up would have them fall into the sky.

SOMETHING WE LOST

we could have gone for Harper with his smile hung like your favourite apron, his voice booming out beneath the ding of a door flung wide. we could have gone for the displays packed to the rafters, cheese sliced with a string, toilet brushes, soap bars, sweet jars, eggs, cans of tomato, all precariously balanced as though the whole shop was a giant game of Jenga. But most of us went for the chat, clogging up the pavement, gossiping days to nights, how Freddy did what-not, how Kenny shot fireworks too bright for a Sunday, it was Hello Magazine and all of us were celebrities, dolled up in our daily wear, knowing every kid's parents and every house by name like every gate by the man who painted it. It was about being close enough to touch, to shake hands, to hug.

ALLHALLOWS AT CHRISTMAS

between the red-white drapes of a discarded gown
beneath a fat-suit hung like a hog-roast done
It's Santa, Father C', but he's Dave right now
had a night riding shotgun in a sleigh for fun

a towed trailer, lights blink, wide smiles galore
gifts passed in a net from a sleigh adorned
with love and joy that makes Allhallows home
a Christmas show guaranteed to go down a storm

what a month, what a year, what a day we've had,
what a slump, what a change to everything we planned
locked away all day there are times we break
only hope that we had was in the friends we made

Thats why it's more than just a trailer with a couple lights
it's more than Father Christmas coming out for a night
whatever challenge, whatever problem, we continue to rise,
because Allhallows is community - it's the power to fight

I MISS YOU LIKE SNOW

falls, settles in the village, closes the street,
a film of mini-milk stretched across the patio.
I cannot walk or think of anything but snow

spreading eerily to a boiler, to a radiator cold,
a postman that doesn't whistle, a doorframe
not lined by your slippers. I sit pining for spring

in pyjamas, bread and jam in rations, hollowed
still as a fly that died a busy death on the sill.
Last night I was spinning our Vauxhall into orbits,

the hands of time chasing me, moving me on,
grinding my slippers into the pedals till crash!
A stranger out the storm, pulled me from the car,

handed me his wellies. So I drudged, each step
knee to chest, reaching behind this stranger,
in wellies I thought I'd never fill, but here I am,

home, in the wash of fading white morning.
The village tiptoes back to work, a robin sings,
a snowflake magnified on the window pane

melts slowly til it is gone, till we forget it ever
was the worst storm in a generation, just
as I hoped it would, just as I hoped it wouldn't.

A snowman slouches till his nose falls clean off,
a car grumbles past in a fog of exhaust and
a man at my doorstep is asking for his wellies back.

THE 3RD TIME IN 3 YEARS

a horse ambles free
into the marshes, subsides,
waiting to be saved.

WATCHING THE SOUTHEND AIR SHOW IN ALLHALLOWS

Back when the village hall was a red tin hut,
the post office a muddy patch of grass,
we'd be down the beach with the rickety picnic box,
waiting like the open sky belonged only to us.

They'd dive, spin scarlet streamers from their pockets,
so close we'd speak through our fingers, cheer
til they'd reach so high they were tiny spots,
jewels in the sunlight - before falling.

Today, when I say goodbye I imagine you a jet
disappearing into the sun in a perfectly blue sky.
I wonder if you can see me now, standing at the altar,
clapping so loud my hands turn a shade of red.

YOUR PERFECTLY MANICURED GARDEN

It only takes an elbow with bravado
or an overzealous forward drive
to know, as soon as it clops clean,
it is destined for *long gone*.

Drawing in our necks, each of us
mouths wide as though our tongues
are trying to improve the view, up and –
faces crumpling into themselves – up,

the ball is slo-mo-oh-no diving
where balls know never to go,
landing with the sound of a body
tripping in a forest, lifeless.

Phil weeps, mourns a rugby ball,
Sarah, a bouncy, Ian's He-Man
tied to a parachute drifted
tragically in a freak breeze.

Over the fence: all those balls,
lying in a barrel, a cauldron, a ball pit.
and you, smug as hot gravy.
laughing til your cheeks hurt.

A POEM FOR MARK

My Dad's a Superdad, a super-teacher for the youth,
a Dad who taught me to put my *all* into everything I do,
like as a kid I'd see a crash, he'd be first to hit the scene,
the first to snap a broken rib on my birthday trampoline.
But each time he'd get back up and have another go,
slipping down the garden slide, or singing in my shows,
delivering grub to neighbours, he always finds the time,
taught me community is everything, my Dad is always kind.
So this poem isn't just from me, it's from all the village folk
to say thank you for all you've done to give Allhallows hope
all the meetings, calling Santa, or rounding up the young,
pushing cars stuck in mud, or helping a neighbour's mum.
We know you're moving far away, and we may be far apart
but once you've lived in Allhallows, Allhallows lives in
your heart.

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