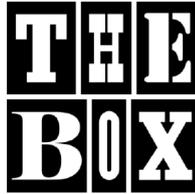




PLYMOUTH
CULTURE



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Literature Works

The Arts Institute, University of Plymouth
Roland Levinsky Building
Drake Circus
Plymouth
PL4 8AA

Tel: 01752 585073

Email: info@literatureworks.org.uk

Patrons: [Jonathan Dimbleby](#), [Patrick Gale](#),
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In December 2020, Laura Horton was appointed as Plymouth Laureate of Words 2021-22. At the live announcement event, Laura was presented her first commission by the Lord Mayor of Plymouth's office. The commission brief asked for a creative response to the subject '*Caring and supporting one another: exploring how the community of Plymouth comes together*'. Laura was inspired by an image featured in this [Plymouth Herald article](#) to look back at Plymouth's response to the Blitz. We're pleased to present 'Roll out Plymouth'.

'Roll Out Plymouth'

At the Blue hour – the stage of twilight shortly before the sky yawns and stretches awake - the inhabitants of Devonyard Street, Plymouth, are all tucked up. Each one sound asleep, wrapped in blankets and dreams.

A row of Victorian terraced houses with angular slate roofs and scalloped windows. Large heavysset front doors with brass knockers and plated front steps polished up on Saturdays. Patterned crimson and cream tiles to greet guests and brown bristly doormats for muddy feet.

Small backyards with tufts of weeds. Yellow dandelions and sunflowers snaking up the high, thick, brick walls. Pots of green herbs and purple petal flowers welcoming bees. Washing lines on pulley systems, where dungarees and romper suits are winched up like sails and whisper to each other in the wind.

Cobbled back lanes with metal bins and rusty padlocks. Half deflated footballs, shuttlecocks and bats ready for play. Seagulls crying overhead and dive-bombing for scraps. Streets that once were open fields and farmland, now packed with human life.

There is: Mrs Thomas, her curlers indenting the feather pillows and the soft snores of her adjacent cats, Mitsy and Bitsy.

Jane and Billy spun up in patchwork quilts like sausage rolls, their cold feet curled together.

Judy and Marg in matching floral nightdresses, hands clasped tightly together under the covers. Their tiny dog Alan lying across the door and keeping out the draft.

The Spencer family sharing a double bed. Lydia and Philip pushed to either side as their children lounge fitfully between them.



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Dr Leyland fully clothed and snoring, clutching her thesis tightly to her chest, reading glasses perched on the end of her nose.

Mr Benjamin sprawled out on the floor, an empty pint glass at his hand.

It doesn't matter how much they're accustomed to this new life, the inhabitants of Devonyard Street are jolted cruelly awake as the sirens break the dawn.

Mrs Thomas crouches under the stairs, a shaking cat in either arm.

Jane and Billy spoon under the oak table in the kitchen, pulling sheets over their heads and telling jokes for distraction.

Judy and Marg sit snugly in the pantry, Judy on Marg's lap as they take the time to survey the contents of their storeroom, lamenting the lack of lemon curd.

The Spencer family huddle in an outdoor shelter, wrapped together tightly, snuggling into armpits and cuddly toys.

Dr Leyland climbs the ladder into the basement. Carrying her work, a pen behind her ear and a hastily grabbed crust of bread.

Mr Benjamin lies on the floor, an empty pint glass at his hand.

Nothing and no one stirs as the sky fills with threat.

Over twenty minutes Devonyard Street, Plymouth, is battered and burnt, like many streets before it, in towns and cities across the world.

What follows this disquiet is a wild silence, not even a seagull's cry, until finally a brick buckles in a nearby doorframe and a tentative mouse jumps and squeaks.

Mrs Thomas takes a deep breath and lifts her head cautiously above the parapet. What she sees is not peeling paisley wallpaper but the street scattered inside out.

Chimney pots in dining rooms; sofas on rubble; toothbrushes in plant pots; and mugs in toilets.

Jane and Billy lift their dusty faces from under the one-legged table. Their first home together now a scarred shell, wedding photos broken and charred with missing faces.

Lydia and Philip follow their children through the garden of broken gnomes to their half home. One wall entirely blown off revealing a tableaux of human living, a dolls house with an open door.

Judy and Marg emerge covered in flour, Alan licking plum jam from broken jars. Their house of thirty years crammed now with splintered antique mirrors, squashed trinkets and scattered jewellery.

Dr Leyland pushes open the basement door and emerges to an alien scene, a landscape of smoke and desolation. As she draws breath her thesis slips from her hands and flies away, she doesn't notice.

Mr Benjamin snores open to the elements, a shattered pint glass at his hand. His piss pot overturned, beer bottles cracked and emptied.

An intact piano stands upright in the centre of Mrs Thomas' wrecked dining room. Knives, forks and smashed crockery scatter themselves around the base of the instrument, like a modern art installation.

Mitsy leaps onto the keys and straight back off, the discord echoes across the wreckage and each head turns. The children side-eye each other and back to the cat, prickled fur and wide eyes, they throw their heads back and cackle at the absurdity.

The rest of the inhabitants of Devonyard Street slowly emerge, babes in arms, teenagers, students, first time buyers, renters, newlyweds, divorcees, singletons, pensioners, workers, those looking for work.

Their lives intertwined by closeness, grief and intermingled things.

Dr Leyland spots her knickers on the Spencers' living room sofa, Marg's dentures sit atop Mr Benjamin's boiler. Billy's brogues rest on Judy's dresser and Mrs Thomas' saucepan in Lydia's beloved tin bath.

Memories, possessions, treasured and nostalgic things, mixed up and smashed up in minutes.

Without uttering a word and with a nod from Mrs Thomas, Marg and Billy start pushing the piano into the middle of the road, or where the road roughly would've been.

Lydia carries a chair behind them and Mitsy and Bitsy stalk proudly beside her.

Philip pulls the chair back and Mrs Thomas sits. She clears her throat, focusing only on the task at hand, fingers poised above the keys.

That first deep chord vibrates across the rock and rubble, through flesh and bone, as they navigate their slippered routes towards the music, and to each other.

Melody filling the gaps of what cannot be said but only felt.

Dr Leyland grabs a mop handle and starts beating time.

Marg waves a washing line around in the air defiantly.

The Spencer family link arms in a chain and spin around.

Mr Benjamin, finally roused awake, sits on a nearby chimney pot, clapping along.

They all sing, whether they know the words, make them up, or hum along:

Roll out the barrel, we'll have a barrel of fun, roll out the barrel, we've got the blues on the run, Zing boom tararrel, ring out a song of good cheer, now's the time, to roll the barrel, for the gang's all here.

This catchy Czech translation, warbled across the world in different languages.

All bound by together by the same music, whether they know it or not.

Mrs Thomas' blue curlers fall from her hair with every rousing head turn and Mitsy and Bitsy paw them spiritedly.

Jane and Billy stomp their feet and pat the piano.

Judy and Marg hold either end of the clothesline and spin it for children to skip through.

Philip and Lydia take a moment to hold each other.

Mr Benjamin and Dr Leyland conduct the singers with glee.

This cleanup will take hours, days, weeks, months, and years. Finding places to stay, things to salvage and those to let go.

They also know to take the day one second, one minute, one moment at a time, and in this instant, their priceless and wild lives are all song.

Laura Horton, March 2021.