Stourbridge Common

In the remote village of Horningtoft in East Anglia, where Ealdwald had been born in the year 1236, even the seemingly noiseless had a sound. Without even having to hone your ear one could hear the whistling of the hedgerows, the chirping of even the smallest of birds and, in the summer months, the gentle buzz of the bee. On occasion, Ealdwald heard the mechanised chiming of the church bells, the lunking of the wooden

cogs in the watermill. On the whole though, his world was one of quiet and natural wonder.

just 14 households and 31 villagers. He lived a healthy walk away from the next village along and so felt he always had room to stretch out and breathe. It really was the archetypal English hamlet, a little over a dozen homes surrounding a village green with a single street running through this remote but tightly knit community. Ealdwald knew not just the names of his livestock but those of everyone in the village. These were the people he had grown up with and whom he knew most intimately.

However, on reaching his fourteenth birthday in the summer of

His father had demanded he accompany him on his first day trip from the village, travelling first on horseback and then via bo journey to Stourbridge Common, just outside Cambridge, for their annual fair. Ealdwald had heard very little about the fair. His father simply had some excess textiles that he was hoping to sell. unremarkable plot of land yet for two weeks in September it was utterly transformed. Ealdwald wondered through a maze of temporarily erected streets with a range of wooden booths on the outside. Traders were so desperate for the best pitch that Ealdwald was stepping over straw mattresses strewn across the floor.

interest, as he ventured closer and closer to the inner crevices of the maze of the market, it was the smell that next caught his attention. The smell Ealdwald was most familiar with was that of faeces. His nose was a far less prissy organ than that of his urban contemporaries. His village was covered in cow dung as well as goat, sheep and pig droppings, with the sweeter smelling turds of the vegetable eating animals often pervading throughout the village on any given day. At Stourbridge, his upturned nostrils found themselves bombarded with an array of novel smells that he almost did not have the vocabulary to describe. The combination of pepper, ginger, cinnamon, clove, saffron as well as uniquely medieval gems such grains of paradise and spikenard made him wish he could bottle up a barrel load and sprinkle it over every crevice of Horningtoft to rid it of its faecal undertones.

After the sound and smells, it was the people to which Ealdwald was next drawn. He and his father were at the more working-class end of the social spectrum, dressed in their simple open tunics, their original cream shade darkened with years of work on the fields. This was what all in the village wore, bar the local priest, yet, in Stourbridge, Ealdwald was in the minority. He saw merchants speaking a language he had never heard, covered head to toe in purple velvets. He was told they were men from the east, from an unknown land called Constantinople. As well as these men there were a group of three wealthy looking merchants, well-versed in the arts of haggling, dealing and refunding the array of goods that lay at their feet covered in soft red velvet overshirts. Despite these flashes of colour, it was a group of four men dressed in what Ealdwald could only describe as the softest, smoothest material he had ever seen with flashes of royal blue epaulettes hanging the variety of goods they picked up made their way to adorn the

Westminster.

to easily shift their surplus textile to two merchants, Nimble-Heels and Stupid Stephen, whom his father had done extensive business with before, as their rather cordial nicknames suggested. He said he had got an unusually good price giving Ealdwald a small surplus with which to play. They wandered the tightly packed streets staring at all manners of things. He had come to a world where traders of all sorts could be found there were markets for fish, wax, spices, timber, salt, cloth, almonds, spices and iron goods. The fair had sections set aside for cheese sellers, shoemakers, ironmongers, horse dealers and traders from every possible industry.

Ealdwald thought he had explored every crevice of the market so made his way to the Duddery, the makeshift town square in the centre of the fair. In it, he found a maypole and a small crowd dancing to the music of a local band. Eadwald eventually found himself joining in, dancing and laughing with fellow youngsters who moved from strangers to friends as the evening passed. He used his little surplus to buy a small cup of mead for a young girl who he met and danced with who happened to live four villages west of him. Money well spent in his eyes, he hoped to see her at the fair next year!

that their boat back to Horningtoft was about to leave. As their boat pulled further and further into the reaches of the River Cam, the bustling noise, array of colours and new smells faded into obscurity and by late morning the next day Eadwald found himself back in familiar Horningtoft. He found himself longing to return to that fateful fair on the outskirts of Cambridge. His rural bubble having been emphatically burst by the joys that Stourbridge Fair had to offer, he was certain he would return next year. The Knight

Should we have stayed

I kneel and put my hands, palms together, between the palms of Mother Abbess. My knees feel the cold floor through the rough-spun brown wool of my habit.

God bless you, my says the Abbess, and bids me rise to my feet, seating herself in her chair. My head is at the same level as hers. I am thirteen and not yet grown.

The novice mistress has told

I write in my head, Mother. I write stories about the characters who come to our Abbey church, and about the Bible characters.

I am writing a longer story about the families, Mother, and I want to write it

And they sit together that night, near

And Jesu asks the sisters if they will stay with him through all that he has to

whole earth, and Jesu is stamping and laughing as his naked body spins free of the clothes of death that bound him and

Nan gasps and they all gasp and stop dancing and stand stock still and stare at Jesu.

They can see his naked body. It is the body of a woman. Jesu is a woman.

And at that moment he disappears.

The sisters cannot stop talking about what they have seen. But then other followers of Jesu, women, come to the tomb, and so the sisters quietly leave that place. Nan thinks they have seen and learned all that they need.

And joining a caravan for safety, they make their way back to their homes in Galilee.

And Nan writes everything down.

But no one believes her. No one believes the sisters have been with Jesu and gone to Jerusalem and passed through death with him and seen him in new life, in new life as one of them, as a woman. Their families, who knew been absent, decide to remain silent and deny everything. And mother steals writing from her and whips her for telling

\* \* \*

I stop speaking.

At no point has Mother Abbess interrupted me.

Now she rises from her chair. I dare to look at her but I cannot read her face.

Now I am mature in my religious life and have learned the ways of the church and of the men who rule it, I know the answer only too well. I can do nothing with it. So, frustrated, I replace it and cover the trunk and repeat the order that it is to be left alone.

And now I am very old and another is Abbess, and armies have come to ransack our monastery. I see two soldiers rifle casually through the papers in the secret trunk.

As we leave, homeless women treading a new and unkind path, I see a movement in the bushes. One of the soldiers is squatting. He finishes, and I watch as he tosses away a soiled piece of parchment that he has used to wipe himself. I am too far away to see what is written on it, but somehow I know, I just know, that it is my story.

A Slither in time

Dear Dorothy

Human Grains

...•`H~P ° F3r' G I0

Trapped in Takehara

Exquisite

Part I - A Christmas Formal

## Part II - Alice through the painting

The Darker The Skin, The Deeper The Bruises are Buried

It was at one of the usual BBC watering-holes that I encountered a young student poet named Edward Kamau Brathwaite. Freshly plucked out of Pembroke College Cambridge, where he attended on a Barbados Island Scholarship, he had made his way onto the fledgling Caribbean Voices Radio had burst the stiff upper lip of its banks as it did most winters. It comforted me.

We dined in the dark wooded Christopher Smart Room. Kamau sat among the other two island scholars to my left: Agwe Etienne and Lindo Belfield. They spoke of mutual interests, histories, textures, childhoods by the sea, currents in their Terribly kind, that Kamau. That doesn't happen to be your work up there beside the portrait of Christopher shape and hue every now and then, like the shot of red in the

cheeks when they learned of the banana tree. Deep magenta would redden

"Mami kissed your mama with colour and let

The darker the skin, the

Ladies' Night

Running, Running, Running Away

Reality Checkpoint