

how **ART** makes england & england makes **ART**

Made in England – Catherine O'Flynn

Rats and mice loved the chocolate in my father's shop. As the factories and slums were cleared in our neighbourhood, the twitching grey hordes huddled in fewer and fewer buildings until there was only one block left – ours.

Reluctant to lose his hard won margin, my dad would put the nibbled bars in a special box and let me take whatever I wanted. In a strange inversion of the natural order, the mice got to choose and I had their leftovers. Dad would chop off the chewed end and I would marvel at the eclecticism of the rodent palate – mint aero, fruit and nut, Turkish delight. I hoped we might always be infested.

Birmingham, like anywhere, is sedimentary, strata upon compacted strata of development and decay. I grew up during a thin layer – a sliver of time between the industrial and post industrial slabs. Everyone called them 'bomb pecks' but the ground zero plains surrounding our shop were created not by Messerschmitts, but a combination of city planners and economic forces. We persisted with the World War fantasy though - I was the only girl member of the Blitzkrieg gang. Our HQ was in the fragment of a former domestic garden, sheltered by a lone tree in the shadow of Saltley coke works. I found it hard to concentrate on looking out for signs of enemy invasion, my attention always wondered to the gasometers and cooling towers behind us. I took endless photos of them with my Prinz Sharpshooter 110. I liked the Prinz's denim pouch, its complimentary chain and medallion. It was only really the quality of the photographs that let the Prinz down.

It seemed that every week the Birmingham Evening Mail would carry a front page artist's impression of some proposed development in the city. Faceless people walked across elevated walkways and empty plazas. Monorails, of course, moved across the skies. These architectural serving suggestions never seemed to materialise and my brother and I would laugh like Smash robots at each new fancy.

We laughed so much we didn't notice that change was happening all around us. The city was a flickering stop frame animation, changing incrementally moment by moment, layer upon layer. Whilst we were squinting ironically at the horizon for the monorail, the empty spaces around us filled up with warehouses and retail parks and casinos. New neighbourhoods were created, old ones erased or renamed. Each layer wiping the memory of the previous.

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Sometimes I go away from the city and when I return I learn the new pathways and signs. I walk about to lend the new layer my weight and keep the old pressed underneath. Occasionally though a fissure opens at my feet and I catch a short, breathless glimpse of an earlier time: an old shop front uncovered, an unchanged embankment, a car chase in a half-forgotten TV series. I stand still and the memories crowd the pavement like the rats and mice from a hundred condemned cellars.

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