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04/06/19
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I became homeless last year, but I’m getting back on my feet and hope to eventually get back to the country and start growing stuff again – chillies are my speciality! There is food growing around us every day, even in the city – find out more from our look at urban foraging on page 37. Of course, it’s a big week in politics – to mark this, Coldwar Steve has created a bespoke cover for us and he talks about his work on page 20. You can read more about me on page 46.

Hello, my name is Dai

A HAND UP, NOT A HANDOUT
This magazine was bought by your vendor for £1.25 and sold to you for £2.50. They are proudly working, not begging. Buy it, take it, spread the word.

If you can’t get hold of a copy of the magazine on a regular basis, you can subscribe to receive The Big Issue every week: bigissue.com/subscribe

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Is there enough evidence to steer us towards the idea that self-driving cars are racist?

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Why rehab should help prisoners turn over a new leaf

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How Daniel Freeman used the virtual world to change reality for those with mental health struggles

LETTER TO MY YOUNGER SELF
Ralph Fiennes on his journey from punk to the acting A-list

COLDWAR STEVE
The Twitter phenomenon on how he’s captured the mood of bonkers Britain

MIND THE SKILLS GAP
What’s going to happen when the EU labour flow dries up? We investigate

BOOKS
How a torment-tinged Tyneside childhood sparked a spooky story

URBAN FORAGING
Worried about food shortages? Fear not, there’s crops among the concrete
**the big list.** What to do this week in England and beyond

**01 Support The Teenage Cancer Trust at the Royal Albert Hall**
Stars of music and comedy come together to show their support for young people suffering from cancer. Rudimental, Kevin Bridges, Tom Grennan, Take That, Doves, The Script and Levellers headline, each with big name supports and special guests.
Royal Albert Hall, London, March 25-31; teenagecancertrust.org

**02 Visit the new van Gogh and Britain exhibition**
The largest collection of his works to go on display in the UK in a decade features 45 pieces showing how the artist was, believe it or not, deeply inspired by British art and culture – from Dickens to Constable. It’s not all EastEnders and sausage rolls here, y’know. See page 33 for Graeme Virtue’s review of van Gogh biopic *At Eternity’s Gate.*
Tate Britain, London, March 27-August 11; tate.org.uk

**03 Beth Gibbons and the Polish National Radio Symphony Orchestra perform Henryk Górecki’s Symphony No. 3**
Captured live in Warsaw in 2014, Portishead singer Gibbons leads a haunting rendition of the so-called Symphony or Sorrows, which is also released as an album this week on Domino Records. See the premiere this week and read our recent piece about the performance and contemporary-classical crossovers online at bigissue.com
Film: Barbican, London, March 28, barbican.org.uk; album out March 29

**04 Read Dayglo: The Poly Styrene Story**
The X-Ray Spex singer, pop artist, style pioneer and all-round punk icon gets the book she deserves – a riot of loud colour and fierce poses, assembled by her daughter Celeste Bell and music writer Zoé Howe and featuring testimonies from the likes of Vivienne Westwood and Thurston Moore.
Published by Omnibus Press, March 28
Quo frontman Francis Rossi tells how squabbles with Rick Parfitt left him down... The row erupting over a rough-sleeping woman with depression told by Torbay Council to “cope”... Targeted and imprisoned: The horrifying reality of modern slavery in Britain in 2019

Watch the new series of Line of Duty
So full of twists and turns it makes The Bodyguard look like The Bill, the BBC’s hit police drama is back with Vicky McClure and Martin Compston again leading the cast. After uncovering more bent coppers than a plumber’s yard during their investigations in the previous series, they’ve got some serious straightening out to do.
BBC One, from March 31

Get your mum something glam for Mother’s Day from The Big Issue Shop
Flowers and chocolates are clichéd and a new frying pan is just depressing — if you’re shopping last-minute for your mum ahead of her special day, then get her something glam with added feelgood flourish from The Big Issue Shop. For instance, ethically-crafted earrings by Quazi Design from Swaziland in southern Africa.
bigissueshop.com/collection/mothers-day-collection-2019

Make your own KFC
In our weaker moments many of us succumb to a bucket of finger-lickin’ fried chicken — and likely prefer not to think about how the meal has been made. In a bold and creative bit of PR, KFC are inviting the public behind the counter for one day at 300 restaurants to discover how their food is cooked — and have a go at making it themselves. It may alter your preconceptions. Or put you off for life.
KFC restaurants UK-wide, March 30; kfc.seetickets.com

Take on the new Crystal Maze challenge
Unleash your inner Richard O’Brien at a new team-based entertainment experience invoking the notoriously difficult Nineties TV game show, where nobody ever seemed to win an adventure sports weekend near Hull. Currently undergoing a huge revival worldwide as a thing to do rather than watch, the latest reincarnation of The Crystal Maze in central London sprawls over three floors and boasts 32 new games.
Trocadero, London, opens March 29; the-crystal-maze.com

Banish your EU blues at a DIY music event raising money for the homeless
Even if we probably definitely aren’t leaving the EU as scheduled this week (information correct at time of writing), it seems a suitable occasion to reflect on what an unmitigated farce Brexit has been so far — and try and channel all the bad juju into something good. For instance, at the ironically titled Festival of Brexit — a DIY music all-dayer in Leeds featuring such colourfully-named artists as Billy Billy SP, Biscuithead and The Biscuit Badgers and Dr Onken. All door money goes to the homeless.
Wharf Chambers Cooperative Club, Leeds, March 30; wharfchambers.org

Look out for the launch of a new report on social mobility by the Big Issue’s John Bird
Co-authored by the Social Mobility Pledge — whose steering group includes Big Issue Founder and Editor-in-Chief Lord Bird and Justine Greening MP — the new study analyses the social mobility practices of Standard Life Aberdeen, an investment company signed up to a commitment to help talent rounds progress in. It calls upon them to expand their focus to include ex-offenders – an often-overlooked part of society.
March 27; socialmobilitypledge.org

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The leaders of this country offered the people an in-out referendum. But when the people voted to leave they said “You didn’t know what you were voting for, you didn’t vote to become poorer.” They are treating the electorate like children. But they will find out that children have long memories. They will keep bringing the matter up at the dinner table and so will their children’s children for years, if not centuries.

Michael Basman, Chessington

Medical issue

I was recently prescribed Betamethasone, a steroid, for recurrent mouth ulcers. It is not licensed for this use, but is more commonly used to stop organ rejection following on from transplants. The chemist was unable to get any but didn’t really elaborate. I mentioned it to my GP a few weeks later and he seemed to suggest stockpiling was a likely cause of this.

Although the reasons I was prescribed this drug are fairly unimportant, it is critical in the support of organ transplant patients, so would be pretty scary is there were to be a shortage post-Brexit!

Name withheld, email

Churchill was a bit better than May at getting people onside

Extended argument

Many will agree with John Bird [March 18-24] that Churchill did get Parliament behind him in our hour of need. However, he did not have an inconsistent Speaker of the House like John Bercow. Bercow may well be constitutionally correct in not allowing PM Theresa May a third vote on her Brexit deal that is similar to the last two humiliating votes. But at the 11th hour was it morally right for Bercow to throw a spanner in the Brexit works?

George Robert Dunning, Middlesbrough

I would hold a press conference and expose the Deep State Operative then tell the world about consciousness and how it works and how it is hidden from you.

Daven Oakford, Facebook

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25-31 MARCH 2019
Big up

The Big Issue is getting bigger and better each week, congratulations on the work you put into this magazine. I buy my weekly copy from the vendor who stands outside M&S Bearsden – she’s always cheerfully smiling even in the coldest and wettest of days. How hard she works.

Daphne Kidd, Bearsden

A poor angle

While endorsing John Bird’s analysis regarding prosperity [March 11-17], I was nevertheless disappointed not to see him mention the word austerity once let alone any narrative of the single-minded Tory pursuit of rolling back of our welfare state provision, leaving a minimalist level for those poorest in society. Clearly this has underpinned Tory and Lib Dem policy from 2010-15 and subsequent Tory policy from 2015-current day. Until we start to collectively challenge that, something I know John and The Big Issue have consistently done over the years, we will never realistically begin to address prosperity.

Tim Wright, email

Thanks Jason!

I am hoping you wouldn’t mind passing on my sincere thanks to one of your vendors, Jason Kulinski, who works in Norwich on Guildhall Hill, opposite City Hall. I was there today and my toddler fell over and hurt herself, Jason was so kind to her and I and helped her to feel instantly happy! He was so very kind and it really made our day. I am a regular buyer but had no cash today but I hope to see him again soon. And I promise I will buy then!

Francis Schindler, via email

Lovely Stu

I lost a backpack a few weeks ago and it contained a £1,200 laptop. A Big Issue worker by the name of Stuart found my credit card inside and contacted many people to try and find me. He eventually did on that same night and I couldn’t thank him enough.

Luke Parker, Facebook

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Tim Wright, email

Children of the revolution

Regardless of pressures, the education system is kept buoyant by some remarkable teachers

spent some time last week with schoolkids who were selling The Big Issue.

This isn’t some Victorian-era style new sales wrinkle, incidentally. They were involved in a project between The Big Issue and the Social Enterprise Academy to shine a light on the small businesses some school pupils in more than a dozen schools are running.

As part of it, we worked with the pupils to produce an edition they could sell in schools and their local communities.

And so, last week I was at the council office in Paisley as Mary Russell School pupils sold their editions (see page 9).

They flew through them. They also upsold by adding in the school magazine they produce. They were spectacularly good.

The money they made they will reinvest into buying supplies needed to run a breakfast club for pupils in their school. It’s a simple, but brilliant, circular scheme.

They knocked my socks off. Not just because they, without exception, threw themselves into every aspect of what they were doing that day, and in the weeks before it. But because they noticed something that was needed in their school – a breakfast club – and decided to find a way to deliver it.

Mary Russell School faces challenges like any state school. Its pupils require additional support. And here they were, thanks to the Social Enterprise Academy and thanks, in some small part I’m proud to say, to The Big Issue, in the middle of things, using their smarts to make things better, and picking up new skills along the way.

One thing that was reaffirmed with this project, that I will not tire of repeating, is that regardless of pressures, the education system is kept buoyant by some remarkable teachers. I met a few of them through this project.

And you and I don’t have to look too hard to find some others who are facing financial pressures, yet have an indomitable desire to make sure the kids they teach have a fighting chance.

Through the magic of Twitter I discovered, for instance, there is a teacher in The Clara Grant primary school in Tower Hamlets who, facing budget cuts and realising that the children there who loved reading (all of them!) wouldn’t have books, came up with an inventive solution. She put together a wishlist on Amazon and invites people to buy a book for the kids who don’t have any.

Beyond this example, we frequently hear of teachers who are buying essential supplies, or even helping provide food.

It’s easy to get lost in the Brexit fog. It covers us.

But we should remember that out there in the everyday there are incredible people just getting on with business and working their way through.

Join me in saluting them.

Paul McNamee is editor of The Big Issue

@paulmcnamee Paul.McNamee@bigissue.com

Paul McNamee is editor of The Big Issue
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KIDS BOOST BUSINESS SKILLS BY SELLING THE BIG ISSUE

Pupils in Scotland became Big Issue vendors when they took part in a special edition sell-off to fight for the social issues they care about.

Five youngsters from Mary Russell School in Paisley donned red tabards at Renfrewshire House last week, where they discovered the persistence and sales savvy it takes to sell to the public – all in the name of social enterprise.

The Big Issue teamed up with the Social Enterprise Academy (SEA) to produce a 16-page supplement showcasing the efforts of pupils from 14 schools across the country to make social change through business. And just like other vendors, the schools bought copies of the magazine to sell on for a profit (which will be reinvested in their social enterprises).

The Mary Russell children write and sell a magazine – the Russell Record – which funds healthy breakfasts for all ages in the school, ensuring no one has to learn on an empty stomach.

Lewis Fudge, a pupil at Mary Russell School, said: “It’s been really fun trying to sell the magazine to people. It’s probably been my favourite part – closing the deal and getting money so we can keep our breakfast club going at school.”

The SEA runs the Social Enterprise Schools programme which gives students hands-on experience in running a business with a social purpose. The SEA has now supported more than 1,000 schools across Scotland to set up pupil-led social enterprises.

Julie McCallum, head teacher at Mary Russell School, said the pupils gained “great experience and confidence” through setting up a social enterprise at the school.

A group of 15 pupils representing 14 schools had previously visited The Big Issue’s Glasgow office to help shape the magazine and share social enterprise ideas with each other.

The resulting supplement ran in all copies of The Big Issue in Scotland last week, with additional copies being sold by children in the 14 schools, which covered Scotland from the Highlands to Fife and West Dunbartonshire, throughout the week.

Neil McLean, Social Enterprise Academy chief executive, said: “Mary Russell School is a perfect example of the innovative pupils involved in our Social Enterprise Schools programme. They’ve done a fantastic job today in Paisley selling the magazine and we want to make sure every school in the country has the same opportunity to learn entrepreneurship by doing good in their community.

“I really hope that readers take away just how much of an asset these young people are to their communities. They are doing amazing work running social enterprises to tackle the issues they care about – this genuinely is pupil-led.”

With the schools special, The Big Issue helped to kick off a Social Enterprise Academy drive which is now set to go global. The team plans to take the initiative to pupils across the UK next, including schools in Lambeth and Greenwich, before spreading internationally – supporting children to make positive change in their communities.

Hundreds line streets for funeral of vendor Tony

More than 200 people lined the streets of Paignton to pay their respects to much-loved Big Issue vendor Tony Lucas ahead of his funeral last week.

The 52-year-old died on February 25 after experiencing health issues following an epileptic seizure on his pitch outside Tesco in the Devon town. Hundreds of tributes poured in from all corners of the community.

His customers and well-wishers gathered outside the shop and lined the streets as the hearse taking his coffin to Torquay Crematorium went past the place where he had sold the magazine for the last 11 years.

Tony’s family ran a collection at the service for The Big Issue Foundation, our charitable arm. Local BBC and ITV news stations also covered the funeral.

“Tony’s always been a great ambassador for The Big Issue,” said Big Issue Devon and Cornwall team leader Steve Carter. “I couldn’t praise him enough. Today I’m absolutely gobsmacked by the amount of people that are here. Although I am sad that Tony’s gone, it was a happy occasion.”

Speaking after Tony’s death, his mother Marion Lucas-Moore told The Big Issue: “Tony knew a lot of people in the town, they all spoke to him and he enjoyed that.

“I’m certain that selling The Big Issue helped him.”

Photos: Jamie McFadyen
It is true that the study shows the technology behind self-driving cars "appears to exhibit precision" on people with lighter skin tones.

But visual cameras are not the only method that self-driving cars use to track their surroundings. The study and stories don’t appear to take into account the LiDAR system, standing for ‘Light Detection and Ranging’. If you see a self-driving car on the street then you will notice a dome on top. Mounted in there, alongside two-dimensional cameras, are radar-like devices that fire out infrared rays every second to map out the 3D environment in real time.

This is used to anticipate the movements of traffic and pedestrians – irrespective of colour – around the vehicle to avoid collisions. The Georgia Tech study focuses on the visual, which forms only part of the technology that keeps self-driving cars on the road.

The academics used the Fitzpatrick scale, which rates people’s skin tone between one and six based on their predisposition to burning (it’s the same scale that gives you the choices of skin colour on emojis). And it finds inequity in detecting pedestrians between four and six on the scale – darker skin tones – as well as assessing whether pedestrians being obscured by an object, the time of day or database imbalance have an effect.

As a study of bias in machine learning it is useful – these models are prone to reflect the biases of the programmers who built the system, even if they did not consciously input them.

So, while the study has an important role in highlighting a defect in the system that needs focus over development time, the camera is by no means the only system in place to keep the autonomous vehicle on track.

In fact, what these stories show more than anything is that self-driving cars are still far from becoming commonplace on our streets. So far, there has been only one known pedestrian death attributed to a self-driving car. A woman named Elaine Herzberg was killed in an Uber trial in Arizona last year – the accident was put down to an emergency brake system having been turned off.

Studies such as this are useful in developing systems to ensure that death does not follow when these cars are commonplace. Headlines that create the perception that work-in-progress tech is already flawed are not.
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COLORWAY • LIGHTHOUSE • AT THE SUN • PANIC ISLAND • L SICARIO • JONNY WEATHERS AND COSMIC SCREAM
LUNAR ECHOES • PLAYMAKER • JUICEBOX • YOUTH ILLUSION • AS SIRENS FALL • THE BLACK ROSES • CAVALCADE
MAXX PALMER • LEE PA+PERSON • WITCHINGSEASON • BLACK ROZEE • THE GULPS • NOBODY WINS • DEAD AT ELEVEN
THIRD LUNG • MONTY • PRISONERS OF MOTHER ENGLAND • JACK AND SALLY • BRAIN APE • ANGERLAND
DRIFTWOOD • LATE NIGHT LEGACY • ALIVE WITH EYES • DANIEL COBURN • HENRY GRACE • EVERYTHING IS IMAGINED
TVVINN • MIDWICH CUCKOOS • SHEA RAFFERTY & BAND • INDIYA • THE GOOD TENANTS

SEE WEBSITE FOR DAY SPLITS
Investing in prisoners could help them rewrite their story

As a part of the fourth year of the Penned Up literary festival, I went and did a talk. Much of my life is given over to raising people’s aspirations, spirit, sense of wellbeing and direction. It’s as though I only truly got it wrong in the first part of my life, surviving grief, only then to spend the rest of my time offering it up to people willing to listen.

My product, which I bring to the marketplace, is showing survival and flourishing when in, or after, the sticky stuff. Bookshops are full of guides to survive. I do a cheap, on-the-spot, no-quiible survival guide, improvement guide, aspirational guide; but in real life.

I have yet to tire of it because I can see how good it is to get people to think of their current problems and listen to someone like me who can probably multiply the occasions when I cocked up and yet survived.

I have definitely spoken at many interesting literary festivals. But imagine one that takes place in a prison, where getting in involved security, and scrutiny, that involved locked doors and corridors, with the audience banged up.

Penneed Up is coordinated by David Kendall, and run at a number of prisons, but the festival I went to was at HM Prison Erlestoke, the only prison in Wiltshire, and it was a formidable idea that I hope gains more traction.

But to have a festival you need many things to fall into place. You also need the governor of the prison to get behind it. If the governor doesn’t get behind it, the gates remain locked, the ideas are left outside the fences and walls, and the enjoyments and thoughtfulness that flows through the arts doesn’t happen.

I spoke for an hour and was questioned afterward by the inmates, with some interesting questionings coming up. But the big idea, if there is one, is how do you turn from wrongdoing to hopefully doing good. How do you jump the fence, so to speak (a good analogy for a prison). How do you scale the walls of poverty and need that is nearly always the foundation stone of crime, and get into something where you can make something of your human potential?

One of the centrepieces of the prison is the prison library, run passionately and efficiently by Wiltshire Council. It offers educational, physical and social improvement to help you out of the sticky stuff. It’s a place where education, reading and studying — and becoming useful to yourself — helps you on that road out.

Tim Knight, the prison governor, is committed to the festival and sees that if you want your inmates to prosper in later life they need education and the culture of learning to get that chance. The prison service has been cut, losing over 7,000 officers since 2010 — although the current government has brought in more recruits. Without officers, and experienced officers, you don’t get the chance to have literary festivals. You reduce the chance of changing anyone’s life because rehabilitation is put on the back burner.

As the governor says, having the officers really does increase the chance of looking at improving life chances among inmates, and by that changing the route they may take once released.

Rehabilitation leading to a sensible release, with support and decent work to go to, will increase the chances that the investment society makes in our prisons — around £4.3bn in 2017/18 — is paid off.

That may be one of the things we’re missing in our custodial philosophy. That each person who is picked up and committed to prison is someone we are investing in with the hope that our investment will pay off. We invest in children to get a good future by educating them. We invest in prisons and prisoners but, because of a scarcity of rehabilitation, we don’t get the returns we want.

That’s the half-arsed situation. The following story might demonstrate this:

A woman goes to the doctor who says she has to go to hospital. The hospital staff admit her. A nurse shows her where her bed is, where the bathroom is, asks her what she wants to eat, where the library is etc.

Each day she is fed and watered and visited. This goes on for many days.

Then, one day, she’s told by a nurse that she’s going home tomorrow. And she is completely confused.

“But I was supposed to have an operation.”

The nurse is equally confused.

“An operation? Oh no. We can’t afford to give you an operation.”

And she leaves the next day with the same problems as she went in with.

I often use this silly little story to show how rehabilitation being left out of prisons is like leaving out the treatment in a hospital.

Luck, happenstance, kismet, all these play a good part in preparing people to take advantage of opportunity. But preparation by working on yourself, your education and your skills means that — when luck might happen to fall into your lap — you’re actually ready for it.

I left HM Prison Erlestoke convinced that Penned Up is a godsend and an inspiration and that we need more rehabilitation. Else all we’re doing is giving people a bed and not a cure.

John Bird is the founder and Editor in Chief of The Big Issue.

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A virtual therapist can be just as effective as a human

Between soaring poverty, cuts to services and worsening NHS staff shortages, the UK is gripped by a mental health crisis. But London’s Daniel Freeman, 47, has been working on a solution and proving that virtual reality is not the preserve of gamers. Patients of his pioneering project Oxford VR are putting on headsets to face their fears and improve their mental wellbeing. And unlike past VR phobia projects, even the therapist is animated.

Freeman studied natural sciences at Cambridge and intended to become a physicist, but he fell in love with psychology—an inevitability, he believes, because of his family. “My mum was a nurse and my dad was obsessed with the arts,” he says. “Psychology sat in the middle of that.” He shifted course accordingly and qualified as a clinical psychologist at King’s College London in 2000.

He took an interest in paranoia and what happens in the brain when people seem to have unfounded fears about others harming them. This was when he first realised how technology could play a pivotal role in a person’s treatment for mental illness. “It can be really hard to know whether it’s paranoia or genuine concern expressed by someone,” he explains. “So you use VR to put someone in exactly the same social situations, programmed to be neutral, and if anyone identifies any hostility, that would indicate genuine paranoid thinking.”

Freeman’s research continued for nearly two decades, investigating the causes of mental health problems. He encountered one continual frustration—even if he developed groundbreaking treatments, the UK’s severe therapist shortage meant getting it to everyone who needed it would be impossible.

VR was the answer. He was already working with it for research and it didn’t require anything but an animated therapist programmed to deliver cognitive behavioural therapy (a particularly structured kind of treatment, Freeman explains, meaning no effectiveness is lost with the nuance of human-to-human communication). But it wasn’t until three years ago when the virtual reality industry boomed that Freeman could set his plans in motion.

“Global companies investing in the hardware really transformed things,” Freeman says. “It was no longer a specialist piece of kit. I’d been working in labs that had headsets worth £30,000, then suddenly you could get a better headset for £500. The software got better, computers got better. I always knew its potential, but the shift at that point in time meant using VR in routine services seemed like a real possibility.”

Three years, a handful of investors and 30 staff later, Oxford VR is treating patients in 10 NHS clinics around England while carrying out clinical tests to treat conditions like depression. “It’s backed by science,” Freeman says. “We know what we do works. The potential for large-scale benefits is so exciting.”

One of the most successful treatment packages developed by Freeman and his team is one for people with a fear of heights. More than two thirds of those treated have reported a total reversal in their fear.

The founder walks The Big Issue through a standard appointment for one such patient: “You come into the virtual therapist’s room and meet the therapist. She’ll ask a few questions then take you into the atrium of a large shopping centre. You can choose which of the 10 floors you’d like to start on—there are various tasks waiting for you on each level and they get progressively more difficult.”

“On the early floors, you might go up to the edge of the drop and then you might be asked whether the barrier can be lowered. But on the higher floors, you might go out on to a ledge and rescue a cat from a tree.” Freeman explains that VR creates a kind of biting point for psychological treatment: When a person knows a perceived danger is not real but every other sense suggests it is, that allows you to act differently from how you normally would. And behavioural changes made in the virtual environment transfer to the real world.

One arm of Oxford VR is gameChange, an initiative working on treating schizophrenia using VR. “People with the illness can get very isolated. They withdraw because they’re so anxious,” Freeman says.

“That makes it even more difficult for them to get the mental and physical health care they need.” So the gameChange treatment puts patients in everyday situations like being on the bus or walking down the street, with an animated coach that helps them regain their confidence. These clinics are currently operating in Newcastle, Manchester, Nottingham, Bristol and Oxford.

Freeman says the desire to drive change is a common theme among the Oxford VR team, many of whom are former gaming industry experts who moved field because they wanted to get behind a social mission.

But he does not claim to have all the answers. “Mental health is too complex to have one answer for everything,” he says. “It all comes down to resources. If we’re going to treat the many people who need help, we’re going to need more than just VR.”

Interview: Hannah Westwater
@hannahjtw

NAME: Daniel Freeman
PROJECT: Oxford VR
IN BRIEF: Freeman qualified as a clinical psychologist and began researching how technology could be used in mental health care. He spent the next 20 years researching paranoia and the possibilities presented by virtual reality, until the tech caught up and he could launch Oxford VR. Now the project has spread to NHS clinics across England and he is using groundbreaking methods to help people with everything from social anxiety to a fear of heights.

FIND OUT MORE
oxfordvr.org
WHITE LIES

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REJIG ISSUE

What do you do with your old copies of The Big Issue after reading them cover to cover (several times), solving the Sudoku, and telling all your friends and colleagues about the marvels it contains? Well, artist Bartu Ahiska chops them up as material for a unique painting series.

Big Art uses up to 1,000 clippings from Big Issue magazines to create city landscapes. “The mixed media technique adds colour, intrigue and – at times – comedy to a scene,” Ahiska says. “I then manually add further depth and dimension through the use of digital oil painting with a graphics tablet.”

Ahiska hopes to raise awareness of homelessness with the artwork. To see more visit bartuahiska.com
A 16 my passions were girls, a half-hearted attempt to learn karate and an equally half-hearted interest in punk rock. I liked The Stranglers very much. I went to one of their concerts in Southampton when I was 15 or 16, but I wasn’t a fully fledged punk. My mum sewed my jeans über-tight and I had a scraggy haircut that wasn’t a mohican, it was a weird mess of a crop. I didn’t know what I was doing. I straddled somewhere between The Stranglers and David Bowie. I was a bit of an outsider. Like many adolescents, I was slightly unformed and eager to find out where the next party was, when the next disco was and who I fancied.

Out of all of the hormonal tempests of adolescence, the art room gave me a kind of focus and clarity. I had shown myself to be inept at sports, so I put my energy into art. I went to a grammar school in Salisbury and had a very good art teacher, Duncan Davies, who gave me a lot of support. So I thought I would go to art school and attempt to be a painter, that is where my strengths were in terms of schooling. To a degree that led me to here. I went to do a foundation course at Chelsea Art School when I was 18 and things happened on that course that took me towards deciding to be an actor. I realise now I have been behind the camera on three films (including the newly released Rudolf Nureyev biopic The White Crow) that I have got back in touch with my visual sensibility, making choices about camera and composition and lighting. It is very exciting to re-engage with my visual awareness.

If I could direct my younger self, I would try to encourage that person away from an excuse not to work or an excuse to just go out all the time. Don’t waste your time! Life goes by quickly, so any time spent hanging out or idling your time away – which is a natural thing – just be aware that is valuable time when you could be doing something, making something or thinking forward about stuff. I could have worked harder, I could have applied myself harder, and I don’t just mean in relation to exam success. I mean just embrace things. Embrace life. In adolescence, any excuse to sit in front of the telly or amble about half-heartedly smoking somebody else’s cigarettes hoping that girl you fancy will look at you – so much time is wasted like that.

My mum would play recordings of Laurence Olivier doing speeches from Hamlet and Henry V when I was very young. So he was always this mysterious voice, this incredible, expressive, elastic tenor voice and very quickly became a symbol of a great actor. Later, as I was more conscious of wanting to be an actor I became more alert to the performances of Charles Laughton in The Hunchback of Notre Dame, Trevor Howard in The Third Man and became more aware of American film acting – Brando, Robert Duvall, those naturalistic actors that challenged the old school. I remember seeing Paul Scofield on stage in the National Theatre in 1979 and then Michael Gambon in Brecht’s The Life of Galileo – and I can still feel the excitement of those performances. I worked with Paul Scofield much later, so that was a huge thrill. He played my dad in Quiz Show. But seeing him on stage, hearing that voice, I can still feel the hairs on the back of my neck prickle at that incredible voice and that presence on the stage.

When I started off being an actor, my Mecca was to go to the Royal Shakespeare Company or the National Theatre. I have been very lucky in film, but I hate being away from theatre for too long. I feel that it is the purest arena for an actor. Interaction with an audience is that kind of challenge to you, to engage in that moment. It is intense.

I still feel a delight when I am invited to be in a film. I see how quickly everything goes by and one is lucky to have these opportunities. I never take the invitations to work for granted. I hope I have a greater appreciation of what it is to be asked to be part of something. My younger self would not believe if they were told this is what you would achieve. That younger person

letter to my younger self.

Ralph Fiennes
Half-hearted punk, wholehearted actor

1994 With director Steven Spielberg after both had won Baftas for Schindler’s List

2008 Fiennes’ crime boss threatens Brendan Gleeson during In Bruges

2018 Directing Oleg Ivenko as Rudolf Nureyev for The White Crow
I don’t think I had enough respect of what it takes to make a film. On The English Patient, I had a great time. But I think now part of me would have a greater appreciation that this film was being made. I had too many assumptions that these people make the film and I turn up and do my part – there was a slight feeling of, ‘Oh yes, of course, this is how it will always be’ and not enough awareness that ‘Wow, this is amazing we are doing this here!’ I would revisit that film and others with the awareness of how extraordinary it is that one is doing this at all.

Now I have been the other side of the camera and in proximity to the problems of financing films, I would have a greater appreciation and respect for what people are doing to put out a film, or put on a play.

Have the courage of your own convictions and have the courage to speak your mind, which is sometimes harder than it might sound. That is the main thing I would tell my younger self. But be open to other people’s opinions. Listen. And be alert to the continuous journey of believing in yourself while being open to others without betraying your own conscience. That is what I would say. It is the continuous alertness. Don’t be complacent.

Sometimes there is a sadness that collaborations are not repeated. I loved working with Steven Spielberg on Schindler’s List all those years ago. That was thrilling. I loved his energy – I try to remember that when I am directing. He is very focused and very energised and very vocal on a film set – you feel his passion for the making of a film and that boyish excitement, which is lovely. I loved the energy. I like being on a film set when you feel there is a forward momentum. I hope one day I might be invited to do something with him again. I also hope to work with Wes Anderson again – we have talked about collaborating again, so that might happen and I would also love to work with Luca Guadagnino because I loved A Bigger Splash.

Have the courage of your own convictions and have the courage to speak your mind, which is sometimes harder than it might sound. That is the main thing I would tell my younger self. But be open to other people’s opinions. Listen. And be alert to the continuous journey of believing in yourself while being open to others without betraying your own conscience. That is what I would say. It is the continuous alertness. Don’t be complacent.
cover story.

The chronicler of

BREXIT
BRITAIN

Donald Trump looks confused as Kim Jung-un laughs beside Steve McFadden from EastEnders and a Fray Bentos pie tin is lobbed in the air. Jacob Rees-Mogg may well be nearby. So will Cilla Black. And Danny Dyer.

The cut-and-paste commentary of Twitter sensation Coldwar Steve (real name Christopher Spencer) is harsh, cheap, absurd and, inexplicably, laugh-out-loud funny. He is, said writer Jon Savage, the Hogarth of our times. Spencer, with an iPhone and an app, has found a way to skewer the absurdity of the times we're in as Armando Iannucci did previously.

In this week of weeks, he was the obvious person to create a cover that summed up the state we're in.

Here, Spencer explains how he became a new British institution and talks us through his State of the Nation cover extravaganza.

It started in early 2016 before the vote. The very early ones were just Phil Mitchell [Steve McFadden] in Cold War scenarios. I’d messed around with different parodies, but then I put him above the Kremlin on a May Day parade next to Brezhnev, and I thought it looked cool and funny, so I decided to do a site for it. I had no idea it was going to take off as much as it did.

Then Brexit happened. There was that first moment when the votes came in from Sunderland and it became apparent what was going to happen. I was devastated. Since then I’ve channelled that desperation into the images rather than ranting about it on Twitter.

If someone’s in the news I’ll put them in, like when Morrissey comes out with something ridiculous, or Roger Daltrey. A lot of the hardy perennial we use like Nick Knowles, Alan Brazil, Gregg Wallace, they’re a kind of crap British celebrity, with all due respect to them. It helps, along with the settings and locations, to bring people like Jacob Rees-Mogg or Donald Trump down from their lofty status.

It’s rare Kim Jong-un is not in one. Throughout all the pieces there are subplots that weave their way through and one is the bromance between him and Steve McFadden. You’ll see on some they’re stood together and laughing and then in another Kim Jong-un’s with someone else and McFadden’s looking dejected on the other side. Danny Dyer is always chasing David Cameron as he has probably been the only one to call him out. Fray Bentos is adequate food stockpiling, crap British insipidness that we’re going to get back post-Brexit. My dad said, “You do realise we used to have Fray Bentos all the time?”

I haven’t heard directly from anyone who’s in the pictures. Nick Knowles blocked me, but other than that they seem to have been quite pleased I think. Les Dennis was thrilled. He was in an old Seventies Soviet plane with Trump and Danny Dyer, who’s got a huge parsnip. He tweeted the pic and said, “How cool is this?” McFadden must know but he hasn’t said anything. He’s not used in the same way as someone like Rees-Mogg. He’s used with reverence. I’ve said often he’s the everyman with existential angst, looking on or walking away. He’s that constant.

I used to just post without even thinking [using the work as a coping mechanism while going through difficult times with his mental health], but I take longer now and don’t do as many – they’re more considered. There’s not pressure as such, but I am anxious that it might just suddenly stop. The feedback I get I love, a lot of the people that comment feel the same. They say yes, it’s horrible, it’s scary and everything, but it’s quite a nice relief to laugh at these idiots even though it’s awful. It highlights how absurd it is by making them even more ridiculous.

Cold War Steve presents… The Festival of Brexit is out now (Thames & Hudson, £12.95). See more images at @Coldwar_Steve

He was talking to Alan Woodhouse @HibernianG42
FAVOURITE IMAGE FROM THE BOOK

The Bank Holiday pie-rolling is the first epic one. It’s so expansive, it took a lot longer than ones I used to do. It was just before my first exhibition at the Social in London [in 2018]. That image had pride of place. It seemed to be the one where all the others had led to. Big Sam chasing the Fray Bentos... I also like the simple, stripped-back ones like Noel Edmonds in the woods, it’s a favourite among purists. Or Gerry Francis looking through a plane window.

FAVOURITE IMAGE THAT’S NOT IN THE BOOK

My favourites are always the ones I’ve done most recently. The Roger Daltrey one has proved really popular. I needed a pic of him on stage spinning his mic that way he insists on doing, and then I found the perfect shot. And Neil Warnock! It just seemed to work.
EU MIGRANTS FILLED JOBS IN KEY SECTORS LIKE HEALTH AND CONSTRUCTION. THIS IS WHAT WILL HAPPEN WHEN THEY STOP COMING.
record number of EU citizens moved to the UK in 2015 – 260,000. The following year, the UK voted Leave. Ending freedom of movement is a reason many welcome Brexit. “No more jumping the queue” and “Taking back control of our borders” are mantras repeated endlessly, even though before and after the vote the economic benefits of the existing system were clear. EU migrants each contribute £2,300 more to the Exchequer each year than the average adult in the UK. According to the Migration Observatory at the University of Oxford, the value of these workers to the economy is the equivalent of adding 5p to income tax rates.

But as we know, Brexit is about more than simple economics. And we urgently need an answer to the question of what happens if the supply of labour from the EU dries up: will UK nationals be able to fill the gap? Where will workers come from in the future? And how will key sectors such as construction and health – already hit by skills shortages – be affected?
There are more than 100,000 vacancies in the NHS across Britain. The shortfall could reach 250,000 by 2030 unless urgent action is taken to improve training and staff retention, according to experts who also push for a more “strategic” and “coherent” approach to international recruitment. These were the conclusions of a report last month from the Health Foundation called ‘A Critical Moment’.

Among the vacancies are 41,000 nurses in England alone. To address this shortage, the government pledged to increase the number of training places. But 2018 was the second consecutive year that the number of applications to nursing degrees fell.

The result is the need to recruit more staff from overseas, and the effects of Brexit have already been seen. The number of new EU-born nurses joining the Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC) register decreased by 2,385 in the year to September 2018. But at the same time, thanks to the government removing the cap on the number of foreign medical professionals who can be employed, there was an increase of 69.5 per cent in non-EU staff being added to the NMC register. At UK universities, the number of EU students studying nursing has dropped by 4.8 per cent in a year, while non-EU students increased by 90 per cent.

Another critical part of healthcare are carers who provide vital support for disabled, vulnerable and elderly people. There are 104,000 care jobs filled by EU nationals at the moment. If these workers move on they will be difficult to replace, given that there are already 110,000 carer vacancies in the UK.

Carers bring into focus a flaw in the government’s immigration plans that prioritise skilled over low-skilled workers, with the Migration Advisory Committee (MAC) suggesting a £30,000 salary threshold. Because people who are skilled are always that well-paid, right?

“Care work is low-paid, not low-skilled, so it is quite wrong that it is being caught by the new rules proposed by the MAC,” says Caroline Abrahams, charity director at Age UK. “The social care workforce is already struggling but if, after a UK withdrawal, we shut the door on staff from the EU we’ll make a bad situation even worse.”

Despite the challenges facing her workers, “many of my employees who would need to apply for the EU settlement scheme don’t even have an email address, let alone a smartphone with the right operating system and features,” she says. “They are just not used to this level of digital technology in their lives and the government cannot give tech-savvy applicants special treatment. Based on what I have read and understood, I know that 80 to 90 per cent of my employees would not be able to complete the EU settlement scheme process and would need help.”

Richard Beresford, chief executive of the National Federation of Builders, tells The Big Issue that more needs to be done to avoid massive disruption in the sector. “The government appears to recognise that a construction-specific visa is needed for the industry to plug the gap. However, no announcements have been made on whether one will be implemented;” he says. “With almost half of construction employees being self-employed, there are real concerns that many projects may stop or stall.”

Ten per cent of construction employees who work on buildings across the UK are from the EU, but this number climbs to 28 per cent in London.

“The greatest danger to industry is probably outside the capital, as we expect London to offer more competitive wages and draw in non-London-based workers. This will put many projects outside the capital in difficulty,” Beresford continues. He also says the industry is not set up to allow British nationals to fill all the vacancies.

“If we want to increase the number of construction workers trained in the UK, we must enable more small and medium-sized constructors to win a pipeline of work and not one-off jobs,” Beresford says. “SMEs train more than two thirds of construction apprentices, yet build less than a third of the UK’s housing. In London, SMEs build less than 20 per cent of homes and the construction skills crisis is particularly acute.

“At inflates in the next decade and too few apprentices starting courses, 20,370 last year, a construction visa is necessary.”

And how do we keep building?

Another industry crucial to the country is the one responsible for building new homes and infrastructure. Alan Vallance, chief executive of The Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA), shares his concerns about the impact of Brexit with The Big Issue.

“Solving the housing crisis is a priority for UK government, but they will only be able to do that if they can draw on the skills and talent of European nationals across the construction industry,” he says. “A £30,000 salary threshold would be a disaster, locking out talented architects at the start of their career, and damaging the ability of the UK to produce a better built environment for everyone.”

Statistics show that there are around 8,000 architects from the EU working in the UK, but the number of new registrations with the Architects Registration Board from EU nationals dropped by 42 per cent between 2016-18. RIBA’s own research shows that 47 per cent of EU nationals have considered leaving the UK since the referendum. Some may choose to leave but others may not be able to access the process required for them to stay. Monika Slowikowska, director of construction company Golden Houses, warns of the challenges facing her workers.

“Many of my employees who would need to apply for the EU settlement scheme don’t even have an email address, let alone a smartphone with the right operating system and features,” she says. “They are just not used to this level of digital technology in their lives and the government cannot give tech-savvy applicants special treatment. Based on what I have read and understood, I know that 80 to 90 per cent of my employees would not be able to complete the EU settlement scheme process and would need help.”

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Who will treat us when we're sick?

There are more than 100,000 vacancies in the NHS across Britain. The shortfall could reach 250,000 by 2030 unless urgent action is taken to improve training and staff retention, according to experts who also push for a more “strategic” and “coherent” approach to international recruitment. These were the conclusions of a report last month from the Health Foundation called ‘A Critical Moment’.

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At UK universities, the number of EU students studying nursing has dropped by 4.8 per cent in a year, while non-EU students increased by 90 per cent.

Another critical part of healthcare are carers who provide vital support for disabled, vulnerable and elderly people. There are 104,000 care jobs filled by EU nationals at the moment. If these workers move on they will be difficult to replace, given that there are already 110,000 carer vacancies in the UK.

Carers bring into focus a flaw in the government’s immigration plans that prioritise skilled over low-skilled workers, with the Migration Advisory Committee (MAC) suggesting a £30,000 salary threshold. Because people who are skilled are always that well-paid, right?

“Care work is low-paid, not low-skilled, so it is quite wrong that it is being caught by the new rules proposed by the MAC,” says Caroline Abrahams, charity director at Age UK. “The social care workforce is already struggling but if, after a UK withdrawal, we shut the door on staff from the EU we’ll make a bad situation even worse.”

Statistics show that there are around 8,000 architects from the EU working in the UK, but the number of new registrations with the Architects Registration Board from EU nationals dropped by 42 per cent between 2016-18. RIBA’s own research shows that 47 per cent of EU nationals have considered leaving the UK since the referendum. Some may choose to leave but others may not be able to access the process required for them to stay. Monika Slowikowska, director of construction company Golden Houses, warns of the challenges facing her workers.

“Many of my employees who would need to apply for the EU settlement scheme don’t even have an email address, let alone a smartphone with the right operating system and features,” she says. “They are just not used to this level of digital technology in their lives and the government cannot give tech-savvy applicants special treatment. Based on what I have read and understood, I know that 80 to 90 per cent of my employees would not be able to complete the EU settlement scheme process and would need help.”

Richard Beresford, chief executive of the National Federation of Builders, tells The Big Issue that more needs to be done to avoid massive disruption in the sector.

“The government appears to recognise that a construction-specific visa is needed for the industry to plug the gap. However, no announcements have been made on whether one will be implemented;” he says. “With almost half of construction employees being self-employed, there are real concerns that many projects may stop or stall.”

Ten per cent of construction employees who work on buildings across the UK are from the EU, but this number climbs to 28 per cent in London.

“The greatest danger to industry is probably outside the capital, as we expect London to offer more competitive wages and draw in non-London-based workers. This will put many projects outside the capital in difficulty,” Beresford continues. He also says the industry is not set up to allow British nationals to fill all the vacancies.

“If we want to increase the number of construction workers trained in the UK, we must enable more small and medium-sized constructors to win a pipeline of work and not one-off jobs,” Beresford says. “SMEs train more than two thirds of construction apprentices, yet build less than a third of the UK’s housing. In London, SMEs build less than 20 per cent of homes and the construction skills crisis is particularly acute.”

“At inflates in the next decade and too few apprentices starting courses, 20,370 last year, a construction visa is necessary.”
Construction and healthcare are vital to the success of society where changes are being keenly felt, but all industries will be impacted in unpredictable ways, and continuing constitutional chaos is not helping.

“It’s a cliché but true – one thing businesses hate is uncertainty,” says Gerwyn Davies, senior labour market analyst at the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD).

“The two things they are most concerned about is access to the single market, and where they are going to find the people.”

Nobody in the entire continent can shed much light on the first issue, but there are two solutions for the future of recruitment. Either UK nationals fill the gaps or the immigration system will be changed.

“There are many hidden benefits to Brexit potentially,” Davies says. “One is the increase in training expenditure that could result from it, another is a rise in pay and opening up the labour market to more disadvantaged groups.

“For instance, I spoke at an event recently where the chief exec of an ex-offenders’ charity said Brexit is the best thing that’s ever happened because it’s opened so many doors for us to try and get employment opportunities. That is consistent with the feedback I’ve had from employers directly.

There could be a potential upside.”

The CIPD welcomed aspects of the MAC report that suggested a streamlining of the existing system used to process non-EU recruits (ditching required sponsorship licences, health surcharges, skills levy and other fees) and the abolition of the cap on skilled workers from outside the EU, currently limited to 20,700 per year.

“While migration restrictions will undoubtedly place more pressure on employers across the board, what hasn’t been acknowledged is that they’re reviewing the whole system, which essentially makes recruiting non-EU workers a lot easier,” Davies says. “Currently you have to have a graduate-level job to recruit non-EU. That looks set to come down to A-Level and opens up an enormous number of jobs. Overall, you could see the flow of EU nationals slow but be at least partly compensated for by a higher number of non-EU nationals.”

This is already happening. The number of EU-born workers in the UK increased by 148,000 in 2016 but by just 7,000 the following year – a 95 per cent drop in the number of new EU arrivals. Meanwhile the number of migrants from south Asian countries jumped by 30 per cent last year, with more than 45,000 people from India registering a national insurance number, making that country the third largest source of new migrants to Britain (after Romania and Poland).

Davies points out that the government looks set to introduce a youth mobility scheme that will give all EU citizens aged 18 to 30 the right to live and work in the UK for up to two years without needing a job offer (an extension of the programme that allows Australians to take bartending gap years). This could potentially ease any impact felt in the hospitality and service industry, which currently employs a high number of EU workers – if the UK is still seen as an appealing place in which to live and work post-Brexit.

But going back to the record-breaking year of 2015 when over a quarter of a million EU migrants came to the UK, even then that figure was eclipsed by the number of immigrants from other parts of the world, which reached 279,000 (combined net immigration for 2015 was 352,000, in 2018 this fell to 283,000). In other words, the majority of migrants, even around the time when immigration dominated conversation ahead of the Brexit vote, came from outside of the EU so had nothing to do with the freedom of movement system.

The Migration Observatory, which measured the benefits of EU migrants, documents that the net fiscal contribution of EEA migrants in 2016/17 was £4.7bn, compared to a net cost of £9bn for non-EEA migrants. There are numerous reasons for the discrepancy – for example EU workers tend to be younger, without children – but the proportion of non-EEA migrants is already increasing and will continue to grow.

The Home Office’s Future skills-based immigration report states that “changes for skilled workers could result in an 80 per cent reduction of inflows of long-term workers from the EU and the European Economic Area”, Prime Minister Theresa May said: “This will be a system where it is workers’ skills that matter, not which country they come from. It will be a single system that welcomes talent, hard work and the skills we need as a country.”

So who will fill the skills gap? British jobs for British nationals, if employment conditions become more attractive (flexible hours, for example) and enough training schemes are put in place to prepare people to work in the sectors that need workers. But also a higher proportion of migrants from outside the EU. Instead of a Polish plumber, it’s just as likely they’ll be from the Philippines. Largely white, culturally congruent Europeans will be replaced by a much more diverse pool of immigrants who ‘join the queue’ from all over the world. Of course, amid all the uncertainties of Brexit, one thing has always been clear: nobody at all voted the way they did for xenophobic reasons or because they were a little racist. Definitely not. And so everyone will, without a doubt, welcome the increasingly multicultural face of immigration that Brexit inevitably brings.

@stevenmackenzie

**£30K – SAYS WHO?**

The Migration Advisory Committee concluded that a minimum £30,000 salary for skilled migrants would be a suitable threshold.

The MAC is an independent, non-departmental government body made up of leading academics chaired by Professor Alan Manning of the London School of Economics.

But that amount is quite a lot given that the average salary in the UK is £29,588, and that it varies widely across the country and by sector. The average salary of a nurse in the UK is around £23,000 (though the wage threshold already exempts NHS employees).

The salary requirement has been criticised for not reflecting labour needs in different parts of the UK. For example, Professor Jonathan Portes of King’s College London, who was asked by the Welsh Government to look at what the impact would be said: “Although average full-time earnings for the UK as a whole are not far off £30,000, in Wales they’re significantly below £30,000. That will hit Wales somewhat harder than the rest of the country… quite a few European migrant workers who are doing what you might call semi-skilled or medium-skilled jobs.”

Portes believes a £20,000 threshold would “mitigate modestly the impact, but the government has yet to confirm its plans.”
I’m an EU citizen, how can I find out more about staying in the UK?

To find out more about the EU Settlement Scheme, including how and when you need to apply, visit go.gov.uk/euexit
Frequent and long-time Street Art contributor Rene is a sprightly 90-year-old, who enjoys sketching nature and wildlife, but finds herself instinctively returning to abstract geometric patterns and collage. She lives in London and submits her artworks via the 240 Project, a health activity centre for people affected by homelessness and exclusion.

Arthritis makes the intricate cutting of her earlier, photography-derived compositions inspired by Matisse’s Cut-Outs difficult these days. So she has taken to working with simpler shapes, using coloured paper or painting on white paper to create her joyful, spontaneous, playful pieces. “Maybe that’s where the idea for It Takes Time came from,” says Rene. “The patience you need as you get older, and not just for art, for everything! Even just getting up to make a cup of tea, it all takes time.”

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Street Art is created by people who are marginalised. Contact street.lights@bigissue.com to see your art here. To see more and buy prints: bigissueshop.com At least half the profit goes to the artist.
It’s not surprising that I’ve written a book about a poltergeist. I grew up on Tyneside in the Sixties. The slums were being cleared. Brand-new pebbledash estates, the kind of estate that I grew up in, with parks, swimming pools, churches, community centres, were growing all around me as I grew. Harold Wilson’s fabled white heat of technology was carrying us into a brave new world. Tomorrow’s World predicted jetpacks, paper underpants, driverless cars, cures for cancer. The Apollo programme was leading us towards the stars.

I was an altarboy. In our spooky half-lit church on the streets, my grandfather’s betting shop, my uncle’s window, an abandoned cinema where rats nested in the seats, and my grandmother’s betting shop, my uncle’s printing shop. It was just across the street from where I played football with my mates. In there I read new novels, poetry, and soon I’d start to write stories and poems of my own. I often wanted to be tantalised and terrified by tales of ghosts and ghouls and monsters. I plundered the shelves of books about the paranormal: hauntings, strange disappearances, spontaneous combustion, mediums, and yes, poltergeists. I loved the weird books of Lobzang Rampa, which told of his childhood in Tibet. He’d been a trainee Lama there. He’d had his third eye opened with a sliver of sandalwood. It turned out that he was in truth a blode called Cyril Hoskin, a plumber from Devon. I didn’t care. I’d be Lobzang here in Felling. I was a normal kid – I yearned to play brilliant football with my mates, to know how it felt to kiss girls – but I also yearned to leave my bed and my body behind and to travel like my dad to cancer when I was 15. And despite everything, all technology, all the promises of Tomorrow’s World, all the supposed comforts of the church, there was no bringing them back again, except perhaps in tales. Was it this knowledge that helped turn me to a writer, helped generate the tales and poems and songs that have poured from me all my life?

So somewhere here are the roots of Joe Quinn’s Poltergeist. It’s a poltergeist that takes up residence in an ordinary pebbledashed council house. A poltergeist that draws a smoking priest filled with doubts and very human yearnings. At its heart is a boy maybe like I was, a boy haunted by the loss of his sister, a boy who yearns for football, girls and freedom, a boy who comes to understand that it’s through stories he’ll bring some coherence to his life and world. And how wonderful it is for me, to see this story shared and recreated by the great Dave McKean, whose art turns this tale into a thing of very poltergeisty visual beauty.
Those of us who have been waiting excitedly to flag up the eccentric charms of German writer Marion Poschmann’s The Pine Islands received a little fillip last week when the novel was nominated for the Booker International Award. One hopes that many more will now read it, and laugh out loud on trains, as I did.

Fans of oddball European literature will get an instant hit from the very first paragraph of Poschmann’s strange and endearing novel (“He’d dreamt that his wife had been chiefting on him… She knew everything. This only confirmed his suspicions.”). There are immediate hints of Kafka, Kundera and Dordthe Nors in this story of a beard-specialising lecturer so incensed by his wife Mathilda’s imaginary infidelity that he drives to the airport and gets on the first plane to Japan. For English-speaking readers, the novel’s foreign, slightly trepidatious tone – common to translated works – seems particularly appropriate for the tale of a middle-aged man whose disconnection with his current life and his younger self has led him to make a sudden, arbitrary leap into the unknown.

Once in Tokyo, and after a series of fruitless phone conversations with Mathilda (who is frustratingly still playing the victim rather than the repentant culprit), Gilbert meets a Japanese student preparing to throw himself under a train. Despite his aversion to Yosa Tamagotchi’s devilish goatee beard, Gilbert takes the hapless young nihilist under his wing. They agree that the sterile train station is not a noble location in which to take one’s life; man should be motivated by beauty and poetry. Together they embark on their new dual mission: to find an appropriate place for Yosa’s suicide, after which Gilbert will follow in the footsteps of his new hero, the pilgrim poet Matsuo Bashō, and travel into “wild, dangerous” north Japan to see the moon rise over the pine islands of Matsushima.

This is a book about self-delusion; how often we misunderstand the source of our discontent, how we underestimate the value of that which stands so clearly outlined and well-lit before us, drawn instead to the romantic shadows of the alien and unknown. Gilbert is blindly, idiotically fanciful, skating along the edge of his own unsensational truth, terrified he might fall in. He wants to be the type of guy who is ‘mad for a certain kind of beauty’ and relies on the moon to guide him to it. But could it be that he can’t see the wood for the pines? If you’ve ever wondered how a writer of imagination and wit might blend Eastern Murakami-style mysticism with black-humoured Western realism (and who hasn’t?), this diverting novel will tell you everything you need to know.

If, on the other hand, you simply want to feel good about life, the universe and everything, you need to read Jonathan Scott’s The Vinyl Frontier. It is the inside story of one of the most optimistic and romantic acts of the last century – the compilation of the NASA Voyager Golden Record scientist Carl Sagan and his team sent into the cosmos in 1977 to represent the best of humanity to passing aliens. This delightful book lets us sit with Sagan’s crew as they debate the merits of Bach, Louis Armstrong, Chuck Berry and Georgian folk music, and collect spoken greetings from across the planet. The great seriousness and faith invested in their hopeful task is a much-needed reminder that human beings can be quite wonderful.

Jane Graham

REVIEW

Magic arborealism

Tell Them of Battles, Kings and Elephants by Mathias Énard (Fitzcarraldo Editions)

Michelangelo is in fear of his life and without a commission. A letter arrives inviting him to Constantinople to build a bridge over the Golden Horn. This much we know is true. What happens next is the subject of this novella from France’s greatest living writer.

Love Notes from a German Building Site by Adrian Duncan (The Lilliput Press)

A meditation on the architectural structure of a city and the emotional structure of self. What did you expect from such a title? The writing is precise and riveting. What did you expect from a writer who trained as a structural engineer?

Elsewhere, Home by Leila Aboulela

(Telegram Books)

Short stories of exile, displacement and culture shock. Aboulela was brought up Sudan and now lives in Scotland. Each story is plainly written, yet each is an encounter with a complex human life. They are rich, poignant and cherishable.

Good Morning, Mr Crusoe by Toby Litt (Galley Beggar)

It’s 300 years since Robinson Crusoe. This unclassifiable work – memoir, literary criticism, polemic – explores how a novel can form part of our cultural heritage, and not always in a positive way.

Wrestliana by Toby Litt (Galley Beggar)

Litt’s great-great-grandfather was a champion Cumberland wrestler, novelist and adventurer. Litt himself is a novelist, lecturer, father. Litt’s father was an antiquites dealer. Somewhere in between is one of the most open-hearted meditations on masculinity you will read.

Neil Griffiths is founder of The Republic of Consciousness Prize, which supports small presses in the UK/Ireland. This year’s winner will be announced on March 28.
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A tonic for the times

Our turbulent political climate is mirrored by recent developments in classical music. But fear not, says Claire Jackson – we’ve got Piano Day to look forward to.

It started with the invitation.

We were to enter the event ‘via the Middle Drawbridge’ – no, this wasn’t an immersive opera or some sort of cosplay, it was the Odyssean Ensemble’s concert told (with absolutely no hint of innuendo, you understand): “crown jewels”.

Royal of St Peter ad Vincula – based in the Tower of London – everything is out of the ordinary.

The newly formed Odyssean Ensemble – a vocal group conducted by Colm Carey – is on a mission to bring Byrd to a wider audience. The ensemble has just been commissioned by the BBC to create a radio play with actor David Suchet about Byrd’s life, and recently released its debut recording, through Linn Records, of Byrd’s masterpiece, Great Service – highlights of which were performed at the Chapel Royal of St Peter ad Vincula – based in the Tower of London – everything is out of the ordinary.

Speaking of which, British chamber group Aurora Orchestra will perform at Klarafestival in Brussels later this month in a programme that celebrates cultural links between Europe and the UK. Aurora Orchestra’s debut appearance at Bozar, Brussels’ leading concert hall, coincides with the UK’s scheduled departure from the EU (March 29). Conducted by leading French-German cellist Nicolas Altstaedt and featuring British tenor Ian Bostridge, the concert ends with Haydn’s tongue-in-cheek Farewell symphony. During the final movement, the players leave the stage one by one, leaving just a pair of muted violins. Metaphor? What metaphor?

As well as being Brexit Day (perhaps), March 29 is also Piano Day. The worldwide event takes place on the 88th day of the year to tie in with the number of keys on the instrument in question. Post-classical composer and pianist Nils Frahm reminds us that we need this day because “it doesn’t hurt to celebrate the piano and everything around it: performers, composers, piano builders, tuners, movers and most important, the listener”. There are concerts taking place all over the globe (visit pianoday.org for details). The Leeds International Piano Competition’s Piano Trail sees pop-up performances take place across the city, featuring scholars from the Lang Lang International Music Foundation. The pianists will also play in the Piano Fantasia at Leeds Town Hall (March 28), which involves more than 1,000 primary school children. These events are part of the competition’s annual festival (March 28-April 7).

Lang Lang, the world’s most famous pianist took centre stage at the recent Music & Drama Education Expo, held at London’s Olympia. Lang Lang was in town to launch his new album Piano Book and accompanying sheet music of the same name, as well as to share his insights on music education and cultural exchange.

I was lucky enough to conduct an on-stage interview with Lang Lang, where he explained why he’d chosen the music for the new collection, which features works from Mozart to Amélie composer Yann Tiersen. Through the Lang Lang Piano Book, the pianist hopes to inspire students and teachers to keep motivated through daily practice, using the same studies and miniatures he did. As an added bonus, Lang Lang made an appearance at the Music Teacher Awards ceremony later that evening, to present the Music Teacher Magazine Editor’s Award to Opera Holland Park for its Hope for Grenfell Memorial Gala.

Key man: Nils Frahm is one of the Piano Day highlights.

LISTEN TO...
The LA Philharmonic, conducted by Gustavo Dudamel, has joined forces with Deutsche Grammophon to release a series of albums this year to mark the orchestra’s centenary. The first instalment celebrates John Williams, the conductor the LA Phil at the Hollywood Bowl every summer since 1978. The disc includes music from films Star Wars: The Force Awakens, Jurassic Park and Memoirs of a Geisha.

@claireiswriting

Photo: Anne-Helene Lebrun / Redferns via Getty Images

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The Big Issue Foundation has supported my efforts at journalism - publishing and commissioning my articles and enabling me to take a short course in journalism. It has fostered my creative side: a postcard I designed for a Big Issue competition, is now on sale at the shop “We Built This City” in Carnaby Street. The Foundation has afforded me the opportunity to contribute to events and share the stark realities of homelessness with the wider public.

But my plan to conquer the universe doesn’t stop here. I realised that there is a Muffin Man shaped space on Drury Lane into which I would fit perfectly. My dream is to bring joy to those walking down Drury Lane by selling the greatest muffins they have ever tasted. So, all being well, this time next year, if anybody asks you: “Do you know the Muffin Man?”, you can answer, “Certainly! He used to sell The Big Issue.”

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Brush with greatness

Willem Dafoe’s outstanding performance as Vincent van Gogh works best when it focuses on the purity of the artistic process, says Graeme Virtue

I

S it ever anything other than a delight to see Willem Dafoe? A tireless work ethic means that the man with the crushed velvet voice and endlessly equivocal grin pops up all over the place as a supporting actor, recently bringing a welcome aura of ambiguity to over-stuffed blockbusters like Murder on the Orient Express, The Great Wall and Aquaman. Audiences are now primed to expect some unexpected shift in loyalties from the moment he sidles into the frame: this time, will he end up being Willem Dafoe, or Willem Da Friend?

You might think taking a lead role would give the chameleonic 63-year-old a little less room to manoeuvre, especially going Dutch as Vincent van Gogh, a notable historical figure we’ve already seen embodied on screen by everyone from Kirk Douglas to the gay plumber from This Life (aka Tony Curran, in a memorable Doctor Who episode from 2010). But in At Eternity’s Gate – named for a portrait van Gogh completed just two months before his death – the rightfully Oscar-nominated Dafoe still manages to find unsettling flashes of darkness in a film that is, primarily, about chasing light. The pursuit is often literal: we see Dafoe’s gaunt Vincent rushing headlong through gorgeous French countryside, his scarecrow easel and precious art supplies strapped haphazardly to his back, looking for all the world like a demented one-man band.

It is clearly a passion project from Julian Schnabel, the larger-than-life New York artist turned film-maker who, one suspects, would be thrilled if someone made a similarly rapturous biopic about him someday. Schnabel’s headlong, often frazzled approach inarguably benefits from the fact that the broad brushstrokes of van Gogh’s tumultuous final years – the retreat from Paris to Arles in the south of France in 1888, the unfortunate business with his ear, the asylum sojourn in Saint-Rémy-de-Provence and his murky demise in 1890 from a gunshot wound to his stomach – have already been deeply impressed onto the public consciousness.

Schnabel’s film is an impressionistic biopic powered by emotion and sensation. His endlessly roving camera makes van Gogh’s artistic process unusually palpable, diving into the gloopy chaos of a mixing palette or lurching at works-in-progress at unexpected angles to show the messy meringue peaks of oils on canvas. While he never quite untangles the mental trauma and hallucinations that tormented his subject, Schnabel puts the audience inside van Gogh’s head by repeatedly using point-of-view shots, an attempt to show us the raw, unfiltered beauty of the world as the artist might have perceived it.

The result is often bewitching, and Schnabel is clearly so taken with the technique that he continues to use POVs shots even in extended dialogue scenes. So when Paul Gauguin – played as a smouldering, pipe-smoking hipster by Oscar Isaac – abandons Vincent to pursue his career back in Paris, you are staring directly into Isaac’s eyes as he, essentially, breaks up with you. Later, there is a similarly intimate argument-cum-confession with the striking Mads Mikkelsen as a concerned local priest who doubles as a brutal art critic.

Unfortunately, the script – which dabbles early on with French but for the most part sticks to English – is often lacking in similar artistry. At one point, it forces Dafoe to explain the origin of the phrase “stroke of genius”. He later wonders, with startling foresight, whether God made him a painter “for people who aren’t born yet”. To his credit, Dafoe makes even the clunkiest of these lines work, but At Eternity’s Gate is at its ravishing best when the voices fall away to leave van Gogh in ecstatic communion with nature. You emerge from the cinema looking at the world anew. What more could any artist ask of an account of their life?

★★★★☆

At Eternity’s Gate is in cinemas and available on Curzon Home Cinema from March 29
@GraemeVirtue
Dance me to the end of love

I, Daniel Blake writer Paul Laverty explains why he broke his own biopic rule to tell the story of Cuban ballet superstar Carlos Acosta

It smelled good, like fresh coffee, like a sweet malt. Cuba. Close your eyes and say it slowly. Even the sound of the word cheers up the soul, and stirs up all five senses.

How many times have we seen terrible biopics about fascinating lives? Biopics you might think should be easier, as it’s all there after all. One damn thing after another, no matter how fascinating, is like quicksand, swallows you up before you know it, and you begin to suffocate as one more intriguing incident squeezes the life out of a life. Cinema is hungry for relationships, and that takes time. How to manage time is a critical question in any story, but especially a biopic.

I had always studiously avoided biopics; much less hassle to have characters invented or long dead, but the problem with Carlos Acosta was that he was very much alive and still dancing. An old friend, producer Andrea Calderwood, asked me to read his autobiography and meet Carlos down in London. I did. We laughed a lot at my Glaswegian Spanish and his Cuban English. It’s always great fun to kick ideas around at the beginning before you have the responsibility of delivering. I told Carlos I didn’t have a clue how to do a biopic but that I would ask Iciar Bollain, the Spanish director whom I have the good fortune to work with now and again [Laverty and Bollain are married], to see if she would travel to Havana with us and see if we could find a way.

We were rescued from confusion by a young dancer in Carlos’s company, based in Havana, during a break in the rehearsals. She held a cigarette in her right hand. In her left, with shin to her forehead, she held her toes above her head as she chatted casually about her life. As the rehearsals continued over the two weeks I was mesmerised by the artistry, the physicality, the wonder, of moments of inspiration and the mind-numbing, boring repetition of it all. And Carlos was there, in his mid-40s, working as hard as they were. Ice, sweat, sinews, leaps, groans, “Even my eyebrows are sore,” one told me. They were superstars, Champions League.

So why the hell not dance the life of Yuli, Carlos’s nickname, and take advantage of all that raw talent dangling there like ripe fruit. Use real dancers, and not have some actor on a crash course for three months and faking it with the aid of a good editor.

Let me tell you about Edilson [Manuel Olbera Nuñez] and Santiago [Alfonso]. Edilson is 11 and plays Carlos as a child. Casting was held two blocks from his home. He heard rumours about the casting for “some film” and asked his dad if he could go. His father told him not to waste his time. So he came on his own. He stunned Iciar by his natural talent. He’s special and it broke my heart when we arrived in the Karl Marx Theatre in Havana for the première 18 months later, along with the 5,400 crowd and the thousands outside the cinema who couldn’t get in, to learn that Edilson would miss the opening because he had moved to Miami with his mother.

Santiago, who plays Carlos’s father, is 78 and looks 20 years younger. He never acted before either, but was a choreographer
who went on to be the director of the iconic Tropicana dance company. He told brilliant stories of the mafia before the revolution whom he knew. When he says his prayers to his African gods in the film, I felt nostalgia for belief again. I love it when filmmakers not only take chances with the material, but the casting. The Cubans were magnificent.

The film was in prep as Hurricane Irma decimated Caribbean islands and affected Cuba too. It took the art department three months to find enough wood to lay down for the dance scenes. The same wood had to be laid, and relaid in three different locations as the film progressed. Another reminder that the illegal embargo by the United States imposed now for almost 60 years continues its vicious collective punishment against the Cuban people.

Isn’t it ironic, and very revealing about the world of cinema, that we would have raised more money to make this story in English. Over our dead bodies, of course.

Yuli is released on April 12, following an exclusive Live Film Event at the Royal Opera House on April 3 with a Q&A from Acosta and filmmakers, live streamed to cinemas nationwide. Tickets are available at acostafilm.com

Mark Steel’s in Town has just finished its ninth series. He has now visited 35 destinations. Its longevity is tribute to his relentlessly energetic curiosity and sharp eye for human absurdity. Series One began with him playing Skipston’s cattle market that is “hosed down to become the town’s theatre” and the most recent series concluded with him celebrating the Blaze corruption of Malta in the hope that the assassination this would lead to would at least mean he would get his own island shrine.

Steel has a warm way of telling people that the world and its occupants are preposterous and his audience welcome the news of their absurdity. In Malta, as well as the passport corruption that has Russian moneymen supposedly living three to a garage, he highlights the pointless cannon bursts of celebration, the sudden appearances of marching bands and the claustrophobic planning permissions: “You could have the Taj Mahal and they’d say ‘You could balance a nightclub on top of that.’” Standing outside a bank, the quiet was suddenly smashed to smithereens by a marching band who, to their credit, “were all playing in time, but all playing a different song”.

When many comics spend a year struggling to come up with a satisfying new hour of material, it is an astounding achievement that Steel comes up with so much fresh and specific material for so many series. The Radio 4 listener gets the edit, but each location gets a full-length live show on their architectural eccentricities and local political peculiarities. Steel treads where JB Priestley’s English Journey and John Hillaby’s Journey Through Britain have in the century before, building up an almanac of British thoughts and culture, finding the local divisions and national unities in each Royston Vasey that he dissects. There is an affection in the probing of the softer divisions that are laced across these islands, an affection and curiosity that is so obviously lacking in the professional patriots determined to tear up any camaraderie that stands in the way of profit or power. There are positive possibilities from laughing at how absurd we can be rather than tirades about how right we are. The joy with which Mark’s opening line to the people of the Forest of Dean: “Thank you very much, lovely, but slightly peculiar, people” is received typifies this. He then retells his first conversation in the area, “I went to the Dean Heritage Centre and a bloke came up to me and said ‘I live off roadkill,’ and then explains that he had recently come across a slain stag and returned with a bone saw to cut off its antlers and sell them on eBay.”

If you are planning a summer holiday in Britain this year, you may do better to check out In Town’s back catalogue on the BBC Sounds website rather than use TripAdvisor. I’m off to Ottery St Mary.

Mark Steel’s in Town is available on BBC Sounds now.
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If Brexit bites, dig for victory

Fearing sad-looking supermarket shelves? Foraging could be the answer. Hannah Westwater grasps the nettle

Potential food shortages have been hanging ominously over Brexit for months. Earlier this year, a group of well-known British food chains – Pret A Manger, McDonald’s plus a number of supermarkets – warned politicians about what could happen to food supplies if the country were to plunge out of the EU without a deal.

Foraging, once essential for survival and now often portrayed as a middle-class luxury, is making a comeback. Even if Brexit leaves the UK a dystopian, looted wasteland, there will be options – especially for people in towns and cities. You need only glance down to the chickweed growing from broken pavements under your feet.

Urban foragers like John Rensten will save your salads. Rensten runs Forage London, leading wild food walks through the capital, and teaches others how to live off the land. It’s “ridiculously easy and totally plentiful,” he says, “with more species diversity in a square mile of London than in any rural area.”

The crop diversity is largely down to the way microclimates develop within cities, extending growing and flowering seasons for most wild crops. But it’s also because of what Rensten calls linear landscapes, like the sides of railway tracks, which become “wonderful conduits for pollination”. He recommends picking cherry blossom, which makes a “delicious” syrup.

Wild food is disproportionately high in nutrients, vitamins and minerals, he says, plus it’s free and sustainable. But he knows foraging is considered by some to be the preserve of the wealthy. He even took steps to change that, offering guided wild food walks for £5, rather than £40, for those on low incomes. But he struggles to fill the spaces, even when the more expensive tours are selling out weeks in advance.

“Foraging won’t be the priority of a single mum living in a flat with two kids to look after and two jobs. Obviously, she has not got a lot of time to go foraging about with a basket picking wild greens,” he explains. “And an hour’s foraging usually equates to about four hours in the kitchen.

“However that doesn’t mean that when she takes her kids to the park that couldn’t be punctuated with a little bit of picking something that’s completely free and healthy. Plus, kids love it. It’s like a multi-sensory treasure hunt.”

The guide has two main rules that he passes on to foraging newcomers, though: “Don’t nibble” and research the area. Rensten happily reports that he has never accidentally poisoned himself thanks to the former, emphasizing that eating is not part of the crop identification process.

The latter is especially important in urban settings, he explains. Derelict areas overrun by valuable weeds can prove some of the best places for foraging, but they are also more likely to have toxic chemicals in the ground as a result of industry having once operated on the same site.

For this, budding urban foragers should take a look at their city’s records. There are many parks which are historically documented green spaces, predating the industrial revolution, meaning the soil would be great quality and its food safe to eat. The downside to this is that the plants there could be ornamental, rather than edible, in which case a weed-ridden supermarket car park would have more to offer.

James Wood, founder of foraging company Totally Wild, says people must take a moment to go over the ethical and legal considerations involved with urban foraging.

“If you’re picking it for yourself, you can pick from private or public land,” he says. “There are some queries around what weight counts as too much for one person, but that grey area hasn’t been solved.

“You can harvest on private land but if the owner asks you to leave, you must. You can take what you already picked, though.”

Wood also points out a peculiar law that says when uprooting a plant – which can only be done with landowner permission – you have to leave the flowers or leaves to prove you are not trying to remove the whole crop. Some of the most bountiful spots in a town or city are surprising. Both experts cite cemeteries more than once; often sheltered, reasonably undisturbed soil allows a wide range of crops to grow. But poisonous chemicals like arsenic can be found in cemeteries dating back to the Victorian era, and are best avoided – mushrooms in particular can be dangerous because of how they absorb toxins from the ground.

It is not just leafy green salad fodder ready to be foraged from urban cityscapes. Sweet violets, a near-ubiquitous plant which blossoms into flowers that taste like violet sweet, are found everywhere from the middles of roundabouts to motorway verges.

Assuming Britain is protected from food shortages, it might still be worth shifting diet and dabbling in urban foraging. “It reframes the city from an individual viewpoint, giving you a load of emotional involvement with it,” Rensten explains. “And that turns people into ecological stewards. Which is exactly what this planet needs.”

@hannahjtw

TOP FORAGING FINDS

01 Tree blossoms like hawthorn, blackthorn, apple, pear, cherry, plum

02 Wild garlic – but be wary of the toxic lords and ladies plant, which looks very similar

03 Dandelion can be roasted to make a great coffee

04 Garlic mustard At the feisty end of the cabbage family, like a horseradish

05 Magnolia flowers can be dried and used as a powder ingredient or chopped up for a salad
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Why I like living in Prague
It’s comfortable
I not only love its beauty and culture, but also the comfort it offers. It’s important for me that Prague is accommodating for people like myself who are disabled and therefore require everything to be as simple as possible. Prague offers comfort and convenience. Everyone will also love the cultural diversity here. One can go to exhibitions, events and performances. You never get tired of anything, every day you will be surprised by something new.

Not in the guidebooks
The Petřín
Prague hides many secret places that you will not learn from the guidebooks. For example, under the Petřín, a hill in the centre of the city, where I once ended up by mistake, I found secret places. There is a beautiful garden behind one of the walls. You will also find a hidden garden if you search around in the Third Courtyard of Prague Castle.

The best café
Café Slavia
If you ever come to Prague, it would be a sin to skip Café Slavia, located opposite the National Theatre. Founded more than a century ago, it is an important part of our history. The unique fountain, which adds pizzazz to the place, has been preserved in the entrance. Be sure not to miss it while visiting, it’s worth a visit. And don’t forget to order pancakes! You will be absolutely satisfied.

My favourite place to eat
U Seminaristy
I have a lot of favourite restaurants all over Prague but if I can recommend the best one, it is U Seminaristy. It is located right in the centre, and besides having excellent cuisine you can sit on their terrace, which is open all year round. It is all wooden and decorated with dozens of flowers. If you visit in the summer months you feel that you are in a charming garden rather than in the middle of the city.

Don’t miss
Old Castle Stairs
I like the unique view from the Old Castle Stairs, which you could never get tired of. You can enjoy a completely different view of all the buildings that are otherwise in alignment. Then you can rent a pedal boat and ride on the Vltava river. You can go to the Zoological Garden or around Hradčany, the Castle District. What a view!

To escape city life
Modrany Gully
I recommend everyone buys some goodies like sausages then goes to Modrany Gully. There are public barbecues so you can cook anything you fancy. You are amongst nature, but at the same time close to the city. You can enjoy time with friends at the campfire enjoying a warm meal, and it is just beautiful.

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Thanks Mum

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Period - End of Not Her Education
Anika Food Charity

Hello everyone, my name is Anika Walia.
I need your help in raising funds to supply a slum area in India, with a sanitary pad making machine.

The machine will provide the women there with affordable pads and a source of employment. It will also be demonstrated on how to use the machine, so they can later sell the pads they make and earn an income. I will also be conducting menstruation awareness camps. In a study, it was found that 86% of women in India do not use a sanitary pad. Instead they use cloth, socks, ash, paper and bael. All this leads to vaginal infections, ill health and even death. India has one of the highest rates of cervical deaths and accounts for 27% of world cervical cancers every year. Girls are perceived shamed and are forced to leave school once they have started their periods.

I am requesting you to please make a donation on my JustGiving page
www.justgiving.com/fundraising/anika-walia
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News from the Intrepid Shepherd

Lull Before the Storm
Storm Gareth be damned, I am preparing for a tempest of my own. We are about a fortnight off lambing. The ewes have been given their boluses (to ensure correct absorption of much-needed minerals and trace elements), inoculated, wormed and scanned. I am bringing them in now every night for a high protein feed and for me to cast a Shepherd’s eye over them from a general health point of view. And they love it. All I have to do is go into the field and rustle an empty feedbag. The moment they hear that sound, its heads up, a collective “grubs up” bleat and they all scramble off down the bridle path towards the barn.

Feeding has to be a controlled affair - they weigh around 80kgs and can easily bowl me over in their enthusiasm to get to the feeding trough. I divide them into 2 groups: those ewes carrying twins and triplets on one side and those carrying singles on the other. The first group get slightly more food, just to give those multiple lambs and their mums the extra nutrition they all need. The ewes carrying singles get slightly less. Why? The worst lambing scenario is that enormous lamb that the poor ewe cannot push out and if you over feed at this late stage of pregnancy, you risk that single growing too much too fast. Learnt that lesson the hard way years ago!

So it’s 9 ewes on short rations, 12 ewes with twins and our 2 ladies with triplets getting the lion’s share. I am watching closely a ewe called Orchid – a mighty large lady but the scanner picked up that one of her twins is dead in the womb. I check her every day ensuring she is well in herself and showing no signs of a fever which may suggest sepsis. So far so good but I will need to lamb her with extra care.

I am also watching closely a little ewe called Bunch. She is a dear creature but surprised me last year by producing her lamb 2 days early, at 3am and the lamb was upside down and backwards. I called the lamb Buttercup and she has grown up with what I can only describe as ovine attitude.

So come hell or high water, gales or hurricanes, in the next fortnight, I will be in the barn with my ewes and ready to help them through whatever nature chucks at us. That’s the farming way.

Jessica
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Imagine the suffering this dog endured after having his leg severed in an accident and the stump becoming infected with maggots and pus. We rescued him just in time and nursed him back to health and happiness. Animal SOS Sri Lanka is a UK Registered Charity battling to help the forgotten street animals in Sri Lanka. We are caring for over 1000 rescued stray cats and dogs at our beautiful sanctuary in southern Sri Lanka including Tanar, the dog in the photo. We also conduct feeding, homing, neutering and rabies vaccination programs too. The charity is run by unpaid volunteers, so, with us, more funds go directly on saving lives and alleviating animal suffering. We desperately need donations to continue our lifesaving work, so PLEASE help us.

**PLEASE HELP US TO CONTINUE GIVING THESE ANIMALS A FUTURE BY DONATING TODAY.** There is no greater gift.

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**CAMBRIDGE**

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You must be proficient in Microsoft packages with good organisational skills and the ability to juggle and prioritise demands from different directions. Experience working with vulnerable and homeless people would be an advantage, and a commitment to the social objectives of The Big Issue is essential.

You must also hold a full clean driving licence.

The Big Issue thanks all applicants for their interest and will reply only to those invited for interview.

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About the role
The Crisis trainee scheme is for people with lived experience of homelessness within the last two years. It is open to current Crisis members and anyone who has accessed homelessness services within this time frame.

As the Trainee Supporter Services Coordinator, you will join a busy team focusing on providing excellent supporter care. We ensure that our supporters’ details are up-to-date and contact preferences recorded accurately; that their gifts are processed and thanked promptly and, that their enquiries are answered promptly and appropriately by email, phone and post.

This role gives an amazing insight into the world of fundraising and supporter behaviour, and why people choose to support Crisis to help end homelessness. As a Trainee you will be supported throughout the 18-months, learning skills and gathering experience to support finding a permanent role after the scheme ends. The skills gained will be readily transferable to working in most customer service roles.

About you
We want to hear from you:
• if you share our belief in the importance of excellent, personalised supporter care.
• if you can communicate effectively over the phone and in writing, tailoring and personalising your approach as appropriate
• if you have a good level of literacy and numeracy and great attention to detail.

For more information and to access a job pack please visit our website www.crisis.org.uk/jobs.

To apply please complete the online application via the recruitment portal.

For any questions please email human.resources@crisis.org.uk

Say goodbye to pain, and hello to stronger arms and wrists

A whole new ball game

without wanting to sound like your doctor, have you got stiff, sore, or ‘clicky’ wrists? A lack of flexibility and mobility in the shoulder? Elbow pain each time you shake hands or lift something heavy? If this all sounds painfully familiar, then you could be one of the 40% of people under the age of 50 who suffers from repetitive strain injury (RSI) of the upper limbs - a painful, highly debilitating condition that affects the shoulder, elbow and/or wrist. It’s usually caused by unintentional habits we pick up: driving a car with wrists bent at awkward angles; tapping on a keyboard for hours each day; lifting heavy weights or playing your favourite sport without warming up properly; or any one of the millions of repetitive movements we make during the course of our lives. Overuse can cause painful inflammation of the tendons that connect the muscles to their joints. Fortunately for sufferers, it’s an affliction that can be alleviated over time, particularly with the use of a Powerball. It’s a pocket-sized gyroscopic wrist exerciser that you simply pick up and spin to experience immediate relief of RSI symptoms.

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CRYPTIC CLUES

Across
1. Frank takes a Shaw heroine (7)
2. Composer from German capital for the most part has little weight (7)
3. Mole with bun moving about on the water lily (7)
4. Impure cry of the leper? (7)
5. Strong feeling when first book is returned (7)
6. Almost informal about a place in Israel (3,4)
7. Peck.
8. Share of Phrase and Fable (7)
9. ministries of a cardinal (7)
10. Fish-net; (7)
11. Hit the hay; (7)
12. Trews; (7)
13. Think of a reform school (7)
14. At the end of the year (7)
15. Put back (7)
16. Spring; (7)
17. Launch of rocket (4-3)
18. Put back (7)
19. Relating to an African river (7)
20. In the open air (7)
21. Springtime (7)
22. Advertisement (7)
23. A layer of foam (7)

Down
1. Thinking about MP locating ten members (13)
2. A doctor surrounded by one’s feet (5)
3. A doctor surrounded by one’s feet (5)
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23. A doctor surrounded by one’s feet (5)

CRYPTIC CROSSWORD

ACROSS

DOWN

SUDOKU

To win a Brewer’s Dictionary of Phrase and Fable, send completed crosswords to:
The Big Issue Crossword, Glasgow, G2 1HW by April 2.
Include name, address, phone and issue number.

Issue #1350 answers
CRYPTIC Across: 1 Isle; 4 Bewitch; 8 Birthday suit; 9 Dulcimer; 10 Opah; 12 Dulcimer; 14 Dulcimer; 15 Dulcimer; 16 Dulcimer; 17 Dulcimer; 18 Dulcimer; 19 Dulcimer; 20 Dulcimer; 21 Dulcimer; 22 Dulcimer; 23 Dulcimer.

QUICK Across: 1 Smut; 4 Decided; 8 Entrepreneur; 9 Bareness; 10 Mash; 12 Rafter; 14 Player; 16 Easy; 17 Brunette; 20 Dinner jacket; 21 Retaken; 22 Lose.

Down: 2 Minor; 3 Thronged; 4 Depose; 5 Crew; 6 Dietary; 7 Dark horse; 9 Bartender; 11 Clinical; 13 Fish-net; 15 Trojan; 18 Trews; 19 Peck.
As a young man I travelled around Europe a lot, grape-picking and stuff like that. Then I came back and lived in Ireland for 10 years and went up to Scotland in the Eighties. I had gone there for an interview to get on the oil rigs but didn’t get on them. I ended up going to Peterhead and getting a couple of trips on a fishing boat. When I came to Cornwall in 2000 it just seemed the natural thing to do, to go to sea. I worked out of Newlyn from 2002 until 2013. I still go out now as emergency crew if someone is ill or on holiday.

I became homeless when my relationship with my partner ended last year, but it wasn’t until the Big Issue. I was on the streets over Christmas and was in a bit of shock, I didn’t know what to do with myself. You just kind of drop out a bit. But a few weeks ago I got a virus, and because I was still trying to sleep rough it turned into bronchial pneumonia. I ended up having to spend all my savings to get a B&B to get off the street but I got so ill there was no way I was going to survive if I went back on the streets. So within a couple of days I got a call from the Housing Association people and they put me up in emergency accommodation in Camborne. Now I’ve got to commute to do my pitch, but I’m just so made up not to be on the streets. I’ve got six months here, but I want to go somewhere out in the country. I’m thinking about this summer going to try and work on organic farms. I’ve been talking to a few people about it, I’m just waiting on a follow-up.

I stopped a robbery near my pitch, which helped cement the bond with shopkeepers

Dai made our news pages earlier this year after foiling a robbery at Pennyworths sweet shop
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Dan Roberts “I quit regular office work to write articles at home. I’ve been very fortunate to have been picked up by four different online publications since, all of whom I continue to write for regularly. Going back to the course itself, I don’t feel it could have gone any better. My tutor has been excellent and has provided invaluable feedback throughout.”

Heather Burnside “During my studies I learnt writing techniques that have stood me in good stead as an author and copywriter. I am now lucky to be earning a living doing something I love, and it all started when I studied the Creative Writing Course.”

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