

Central line stories

New writing by Sarah Butler
in collaboration with
London Underground staff

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Central line stories

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MAYOR OF LONDON

Transport for London



Foreword

Writer Sarah Butler was invited by Art on the Underground to undertake a six-month residency on the Central line, to collaborate with London Underground staff in creating new writing.

With 45 Central line-managed stations from West Ruislip to Epping and over 183.5 million journeys on the line each year, Central line staff have little opportunity to meet and engage with each other. Sarah's challenge was to develop creative strategies to involve the whole line.

Central line staff guided Sarah along the line, introducing her to their colleagues and recounting their personal tales. These initial conversations highlighted a very human desire to communicate through story-telling.

The project resulted in four distinct texts: *What's in a name?*, a collection of stories attached to staff names; *Central line whispers*, a tale written by 55 staff from 45 stations over five days; *Meetings with drivers*, short fiction inspired by Sarah's conversations with Tube drivers, and a story in the form of a puzzle, along with introductions by Sarah. A booklet of stories is also available at Central line stations and audio stories can be heard via our website.

We are indebted to Sarah Butler for her energy and endless enthusiasm. We are also grateful to Peter Tollington, General Manager of the Central and Waterloo & City lines, his extraordinary team, together with all the London Underground staff, whose generosity and support has ensured the project's success.

Central line stories offers the reader a glimpse into the rich imaginations, cultures and experiences of London Underground staff. We hope this book is a compelling companion on your next Central line journey.

**Louise Coysh, Community Projects Curator
Art on the Underground**

What's in a name?

Everyone has a story to tell. Working across the whole of the Central line, with its hugely diverse staff, offered me a fantastic opportunity to discover some of the individual stories behind the official uniforms.

The idea to collect stories attached to the names of staff on the line came from a conversation with two Station Supervisors at Mile End. Their accounts of how they got their names aroused my curiosity. I started to ask other people about their names and discovered a goldmine of stories. I learnt about naming-traditions from across the globe and how to make a kite out of tracing paper and typewriter ribbons. I discovered staff named after well-known stories – Dante's *Inferno*, *Peter Rabbit* and the ancient Sanskrit epic, *The Ramayana* – after places; after relatives; after famous singers.

This collection of name stories is fascinating, moving, funny, and eclectic, painting a unique portrait of the Central line and demonstrating the rich individuality of the people who work there.

Sarah Butler

Declan Purcell

I was born in London, adopted when I was six months old, and then grew up in Trinidad. When I was a kid, we used to make our own kites – you made your own entertainment in those days. We'd make them from anything, even pages from our school books, but the best material was tracing paper. We'd cut out a square of tracing paper and then use the spines from coconut leaves to make the frame. We'd attach the coconut spines to the edges of the kite using tiny squares of paper, and glue made out of flour and water. Then we'd attach a tail; we'd use whatever was around, strips of material, that kind of thing, but the best was typewriter ribbon. It was quite a technical process; there were lots of precise measurements you had to make so that the kite would fly – I can't remember them all now.

We used to fight each other's kites. We'd cover the strings in a mixture of ground glass, flour and water, and we'd tie razor blades to the tails. Then we'd fly against each other and try to cut the strings of each other's kites.

At the end of a day's flying, I could never be bothered to wind up the string of my kite, so I'd cut it off and leave it there. I'd come home with just the kite and the empty bobbin, which is how I got my childhood nickname, Bobbin.

Minesh Shah

I was given the nickname Minty when I was a station assistant at Oxford Circus; it was the Control Room that started it, and it seems to have stuck. It's after Minty from EastEnders. He looks nothing like me, but maybe we sound similar – I've got an East End accent. I'm from the East twice over actually. I was born in Mombassa in Kenya, East Africa – it's a beautiful part of the world. We

moved to East London when I was two, and I've lived here ever since.

Mwara Kung'u

Mwara means cunning, and Kung'u means tough – thin and tough. Does it suit me? Yes, people certainly don't walk over me!

I'm from the Kikuyu tribe in Kenya. It's traditional for the eldest daughter to be named after the father's mother, so Mwara is my grandmother's name. She had eight children, so I have a large family. There's a photo of my family, taken one Christmas, and there are eight of us there called Mwara.

But I'm the eldest, the only one who's known as plain Mwara. The others all have an additional name to identify themselves with, and I've had a hard time reconciling myself to the meaning of my name. In the past I've told people it means bright, and intelligent, all sorts of interpretations. But really it means cunning, and I've come to appreciate what a survival trait that is. You can imagine it being promoted as a great virtue in the days when they told folk tales around wood fires, where the cunning hare won out against bigger, stronger animals.

Diana Jordan

My maiden name is Voyatzis, which is Greek. In Greece it's traditional to name children after their grandparents. So Diana is my grandmother's name. It's also my niece's name. It's annoying to have three people with the same name in one family!

Michael Barlow

I'm called after my dad. People call him Mick, and me Michael. But when it comes to getting post, it's always Mr Michael Barlow, isn't it? So I added the letter A in the middle of my name. It doesn't mean anything; it was just so my dad didn't open my letters. I've been researching my family history recently. We've got some really interesting names in my family: Melvina, which means Welsh Goddess, I think; and Melvenden, which I've looked up but it doesn't seem to exist anywhere else. There's a relative on my mother's side who was born in the East Indies, but we're struggling to find anything else about him. We know he ended up in Dudley in 1837, but we're not sure why.

Erald Kuniqi

My dad wanted to name me Gerald, after the 38th president of the USA – which seems like a bit of a random choice to me. My mum decided to jazz it up a little and took the "G" off, hence Erald.

Jay Jagun

My name is Jay. Hindus believe that your name has a great influence over your whole life. When a child is born, the priests will check the date and time of your birth and consult the holy books to decide the initial that your name should start with. They decided that my name should begin with the letter J. My full name is Jaynathsingh. Jay means "Hail" and Nath is "Lord"; thus it signifies "Hail to the Lord". Singh identifies my parents' caste. I also have a nickname: Anoop. It means originality and uniqueness.

Different people know me by different names. Mainly my family call me Anoop; friends and colleagues call me Jay.

Kwasi Darko

I'm called Kwasi because I was born on a Sunday. In Ghana, every child is given the name that corresponds to the day they were born. So Kofi Annan is called Kofi because he was born on a Friday, for example. If I'd been a girl I would have been called Akosua, the female name for a child born on a Sunday.

Brian Farrow

The name Brian means strong or solid. The word "Farrow", I think, is somewhere between a pig farmer and a litter of pigs. It suggests that my ancestors were farmers at some point. We've traced the family back to the eighteenth century, but haven't found any farmers yet – my mother's side were shopkeepers; my father's side worked in factories and light industry, as engineers and tool makers.

Francesca Alaimo

I'm called Francesca because my mother loves Dante, the Italian poet. There's a story in *Inferno* about Francesca and Paolo. Francesca is married to Paolo's brother. One day Francesca and her brother-in-law read the story of Guinevere and Lancelot together; at the point where the two lovers in the story kiss, so do the two readers. Francesca's husband discovers them and kills them with his sword. Dante puts Francesca and Paolo in hell because

they're adulterers, but their punishment isn't as bad as the other ones he dreams up. They're blown about by the wind – that's about it. In the poem, it's Francesca who does all the talking – who tells the story. The character of Dante feels so sorry for them both, he faints. It's a beautiful part of the poem.

My surname is Alaimo. I have a theory about it, which might or might not be true. I was studying Arabic for a while and I discovered that the Arabic word for lemon sounds like "Al-laimun" ("Al" being the article, like "the", and "laimun" being "lemon"), which is almost identical to Alaimo. My father is from Sicily, which was once occupied by Arabs, so I think that perhaps my ancestors traded lemons or something, and my surname means lemon!

Joseph Babatunde Osakue

There's a story behind the name Babatunde. It's a Yoruba name, from Western Nigeria, and it means "father has come back". At my sister's first birthday party, my mother was pregnant with me. Everything was ready for the party, including drinks for the guests. People were just starting to arrive, when she saw her father walk through the room. He was a pastor, and a strict one at that. She was so worried she'd get into trouble for having drink at the party that she cleared everything away and ran into the house to tell my dad. But when they looked for her father, they couldn't find him anywhere, and when they called her parents' house, they discovered he'd died that morning. She said then that if the baby she was carrying was a boy, she'd call him Babatunde.

Bharat Vagani

I'm a Hindu. I'm named after Lord Rama's younger brother, Bharat. The story is that Rama's father had three wives. The youngest wife was the favourite – it's always the same! The King said that she could have two wishes and she asked for Rama to be sent to the forest for fourteen years and for her son, Bharat, to be made King. So Rama was sent to the forest, but Bharat was an honourable man and he wouldn't take the throne. He said to Rama, "I will take your shoes and put them at the base of the throne. I will rule, but you are the true leader." He was a very trustworthy person – I hope I can live up to the name.

Mark Davidson

My first and middle names are Mark and John, respectively. These are on account of my mother's Methodist upbringing and refer to the two New Testament gospel writers. It was mooted in the family that I was to be called Mark Luke John, which would only have left out Matthew for a full set. Thankfully, my parents utilised the good Methodist concept of moderation in all things – even names.

My surname is Davidson, which is of good Scottish stock and has its origins way back in the fourteenth century with a David Dubh, or "black David". I'm not sure what this adjective refers to. The clan was eventually wiped out in the eighteenth century with the exception of one, who managed to flee across the border, presumably fathering a nation of Davidsons. I'm not sure, but I believe our family motto to be "Die another day".

Aquil Sayeed

I am not one to blow my own trumpet,
Though I've been asked to write of my name.
It certainly throws a few people
When I appear.
Aquil is NOT here!
But this is me
Aquil Sayeed!

Aquil means "learned".
It's a Muslim name.
For five years I have converted
And my life has never been the same.

I was known as Glen before,
And I used to like a wee drink.
But unfortunately with the booze
I lost the ability to think!

I cleaned up my act
In more ways than one.
I live each day to the full
And hope to go on and on.

Agustin Mondragon

I used to be called Albert, but then my father died; no-one was carrying his name, so I took it to remember him by. Sometimes people forget, and call me Albert still. I'm from the Philippines, which was colonised by Spaniards in 1565. Agustin is a Spanish name, as is Mondragon. There's a town in Spain with the same name – I was told about it by two groups of Spanish tourists I met years ago when I was working at London Bridge ticket office.

Elkin Neblett

I don't know where my father got the name Elkin from. I read something once that said Elkin is a town in North Carolina, so perhaps he'd heard of that. My middle name is Carlisle. My eldest brother is called Earl and we think my father had heard of the Earl of Carlisle, and so called my brother Earl and gave me Carlisle for a middle name. We're from a place called the Scotland District in the North of Barbados. My surname is Neblett. A few years ago I got a letter from a woman in Virginia asking if I was related to her. She'd been researching her family history and had found two brothers – Richard and John Neblett – who'd left Gloucester in 1696 and travelled to Virginia. One of them stayed in the States, and the other moved to the West Indies. Who knows, it might have been to Barbados.

Peter Tollington

My name is Peter Geoffrey Tollington. I owe my first name to Beatrix Potter's rabbit, apparently. I have an older brother and sister, and family lore says they called me after their favourite story-book character. I sort of like the fact that he was really rather naughty.

Until fairly recently, I regarded Geoffrey as a bit stuffy, and kept the G word out of things. I knew my dad had it too, and that it was after a great uncle killed in the First World War, but no one really spoke about that. My partner's been tracing our family history recently and found some photographs that have changed my view. Three children in their Sunday best are lined up in about 1908; the smallest is a boy in his sailor suit. It's Geoffrey, but he could be my little lad. The next view of him is around 1915;

he's become a tall youth, and this time the sailor suit's a real one. He's on a seafront somewhere, beaming – a navy boy, full of life. Geoffrey went down with *HMS The Black Prince* right at the start of the Battle of Jutland in 1916. It was at night, he was 17. It makes you think.

Tollington is from a village near Stamford in Lincolnshire. There are very few of us Tollingtons in the world, and we can't yet connect the few strands there are. Here's the weird thing, though. So far as I can tell, there's only me and our three kids in the whole of London with that name, and yet right on our doorstep in Islington, there's a Tollington Park, Tollington Road, Tollington Close, a neighbourhood centre, and even a pub called The Tollington. Would you believe that the direct route from our place to my in-laws takes us right by The Tollington's front door? I went in once and told the landlord I was claiming my inheritance.

Dave Osgerby

My surname is Osgerby. Only seven letters, but I've collected thirty-four different spellings of it over the years: Osgood, Osbegood, Oxtoby, Ogilvy, Corgeriy (!) and Oggersby, to name just a few. So, I decided to do some research. It's a Viking name. I come from the East Riding of Yorkshire, an area heavily occupied by the Vikings, and their legacy lives on in the place names of the area. Osgodby (pronounced Osgerby) is a village name in East Yorkshire, North Yorkshire and Lincolnshire. I traced its roots and found an early reference to a Sir John de Osgerby in Beverley, dating from 985 AD. So, it's pretty ancient and quite rare. I just wish more people could spell it. On holiday in Iceland a few years ago I discovered the name Asgair. Guess how it's pronounced? Yep – Osgerby.

Newman Luke

My name gets put the wrong way around a lot: I always get called, or sent letters addressed to, Luke Newman, when my actual name is Newman Luke. My name was decided on when my dad was working with Boy George's dad in the building trade. While they were working together, they came on to the topic of what my dad was going to call me. Boy George's father asked if my dad wanted a boy or a girl, and my dad said he wanted a boy. So Boy George's dad told him: call him Newman as you want a new man in your family. My dad obviously agreed, and that's how I got my name.

Paul Bennett

I was born in 1962, at the height of Paul Robeson's fame. He was a singer, civil rights activist and an actor, which is ironic because I can't sing a note! My parents were fighting over what to call me. The midwife who delivered me was mad keen on Paul Robeson; she brought a picture of him into the hospital to show my mum, and she agreed to call me Paul.

Liam Doyle

Before my birth, there was great debate between my parents as to what I would be called. My father wanted to call me Dennis, after his father. My mother was less than pleased with this double D for a name. She preferred a classic boy's name: William, or John Henry after my American grandfather. My father, a post-war Irish child-migrant, was keen on maintaining an Irish theme, which

he'd already bestowed upon my half brother, Sean. Eventually, and after much ado, my mother happened upon the then Irish Premiere Liam Cosgrave.

She took a liking to this name because of its rarity, plus the fact that it could not be shortened. It was at this point she realised she could have her wish of naming me William via another means, and also please my father by offering a rather unusual Irish name: Liam is the Irish diminutive of William.

As a child of the late 70s and early 80s, I disliked my name; nobody had heard of it, let alone knew how to spell it properly. I wished my mother had named me William. Only as I grew older did I begin to appreciate the value of an unusual name. Then the band Oasis made it big. William Gallagher decided to be known as Liam, and my name became all too mainstream, ruining it for me. I'd always found it reassuring when I heard my name shouted, in the supermarket, for example, when I was lost; I knew it was for me, and only me. Now I hear it and turn to say "Yes", only to be greeted by a mum calling for her child.

The name Doyle is an Anglicisation of the Gaelic *Ó Dubhghaill*, meaning "descendant of Dubhghall" – *dubb* "black" + *gall* "stranger". What always amuses me is that I'm anything but dark. I was a blond-haired blue-eyed baby, in stark contrast to my father and cousins, who have dark, brooding Celtic looks.

I also have the honour of being the distant cousin of a more famous Doyle, the man who brought the world a very famous fictional detective who lived at 221b Baker Street. In the small quirky prep school I attended near Gloucester Road, my English teacher would always refer to me as Sir A in homage to him.

Colin Tovey

I don't know much about my name. People tell me Tovey's unusual. I've been told it's Swedish, Norwegian, all kinds of things, but I don't have any relatives further north than Wakefield.

There's a story behind my son's name, though. He's called Tyrese Amaechi Claudius Jordan, and that's just his first names! Tyrese was the only name his mother and I could agree on. It's after Tyrese Gibson the singer, because I like his music. His mother was brought up in the West Indies, but had an African name – because her parents liked African names, not for any other reason that I'm aware of. So we started looking at African names and chose Amaechi, which I believe means “God only knows tomorrow”. Jordan is after Michael Jordan, the basketball player. It was just going to be those three names, but we ended up having to slip Claudius in too. Tyrese's mother's mother was planning to come over from the West Indies for the birth, but he came early so she missed it. She'd come over previously and been there for one of the scans. We didn't want to know the sex of the baby, but she asked the doctor to tell her, so she knew it was a boy. Because my name began with a C and his mother's name also began with a C and his grandfather was called Claudius, she'd decided he was going to be called Claudius too – she'd even had a gold bracelet made up with the name on it!

Tyrese has a nickname too: Bud. He got it within minutes of being born. It was around the time when all those Budweiser adverts were about, where someone's sticking out their tongue and saying “wassuup?” He was lying there on the table with his mouth open, sticking out his tongue, and the midwife said, “He looks just like those adverts”. We've been calling him Bud ever since.

Anthony O'Donnell

O'Donnell's an Irish name. It's derived from the forename *Dombnaill* (meaning “world ruler”). Our story goes back a long way, but most notable is our involvement in the flight of the Earls in 1607. Following the Battle of Kinsell in 1601, where the Spanish arrived early, and we arrived late, the Crown laid bare the country, resulting in a famine in 1603. James 1st was on the throne, and he deliberately undermined the Kings of Ulster – O'Neill and O'Donnell – by confiscating land and privileges. The O'Neills and the O'Donnells had no choice but to leave Ireland. We fled northwards, up through Ulster and then north across Europe. Lots of our family records were destroyed, either by the British or during the civil war, so it's hard to trace my direct ancestry. But we claim to be direct descendants of Rory O'Donnell, 1st Earl of Tryconnell, the last King of Tryconnell. My first name is Anthony – for six generations there has been one boy per generation, all called Anthony. This is to be broken now as my son, born on 31/01/06, has the first name James.

James Hislop

My name was seen as a bit posh when I was at school. A lot of kids were called Kevin, Darren, Carl or David. My gran used to call me Jamie, and I liked that. She was the only one who shortened my name – I loathe being called Jimmy and Jim. My surname's Hislop, yes, Hislop like Ian Hislop. Tony (Group Station Manager) always calls me Ian; he has to try and remember I'm really called James.

Banjo Oyewusi

In a strange sort of way I've evolved into a Brazilian, a bit like the footballers there, who are known by just one name – Pele, Kaka, Robinho, Zico – but without the football skills. My name is Oyebanjo Oyewusi. It's been shortened to Banjo over the years, since Oyebanjo Oyewusi seems to be a bit of a mouthful – I can't imagine why.

I was born in Stoke Newington, so I really should be a Spurs fan (I've followed Chelsea for quite a few decades). It took a few weeks for my name to be assigned. I was named by my grandfather (who sent the name through the post from Nigeria; phones were extremely expensive and email didn't exist in those days). He named me according to the South West Nigerian tradition of looking at the history of the family that a child is born into. At the time of my birth, someone related to my grandfather was given a chieftaincy; I was named after that event. The equivalent in England would be naming a child Prince during the investiture of Charles as the Prince of Wales.

It's a fairly unique name, but a number of people do have Banjo as a surname; they get emails intended for me from time to time. Often people ask if it's my real name and the answer is yes it is, as far as the spelling is concerned, but phonetically it's "Ban-jaw", with a short sharp emphasis on the last syllable.

Meetings with drivers

Driving a Tube train is a solitary occupation, much like writing; perhaps this similarity (as well as the opportunity to ride in the front of a train!) explains why I was drawn to thinking about how I could work with Train Operators as part of the project. I have based a lot of my residency around the idea of conversation: I decided to look for train operators who were prepared to spend a couple of hours with me in their cab, and allow me to use our conversation as the basis of a new short story. I wanted to explore how I might create new fiction inspired by an individual member of staff without it becoming a story about a particular driver.

Train Operators Francesca Alaimo and Jerry Semple agreed to participate. I wrote *Early turn* (page 25) after meeting Francesca. The story takes a Train Operator as its main character, and tries to capture the unique outlook on life available to a driver. It also weaves in ideas from conversations about Francesca's own work as a visual artist, and indeed, the story behind her name. The idea for *Talking about the weather* (page 33) came from a comment Jerry made about a Polish cleaner at Newbury Park, who had spoken to him for the first time on the day I met him. I also used the fact that Jerry spends a lot of time by the sea as a key theme in the story. Both Francesca and Jerry supplied further information after we had met, and offered their comments and additions to early drafts of the stories. These stories would not exist without them.

Sarah Butler

Early turn

*Io venni in loco d'ogni luce muto,
che muggia come fa mar per tempesta,
se da contrari venti e' combattuto**

This morning, she'd just grunted and rolled away from him, tucking the duvet under her chin and curling her body into a question mark. There'd been a time – and it wasn't so long ago – that she'd get up with him when he was on earlies. She would make tea and sit huddled in her dressing gown, watching him with sleepy eyes as he lathered butter onto thick slices of toast, the world still dark outside the windows.

Jake signs in at the depot and checks his schedule: Ealing Broadway, Epping, then back to White City for his meal break. His train's waiting for him in the east sidings. He settles himself into the cab, inserts his key into the control switch, types in his crew number and his radio ID, adjusts his seat; and he's away. When he switches ends at Ealing Broadway he sees the sun, like a heavy red balloon, climbing over the horizon. It's going to be a beautiful day, but he can't relax. He's felt off-kilter since this morning, maybe because of that play Sam took him to see last night, or the fact they'd failed, yet again, to have a sensible conversation about the wedding. Either way, when the train plunges into the tunnel east of White City, he feels his chest tighten and the beginnings of a headache at his temples. Usually he rolls his eyes when the others talk about the tunnel, how it gets a hold of whatever emotions you take

** I came to a place where no light shone at all,
bellowing like the sea racked by a tempest,
when warring winds attack it from both sides
Dante's Inferno, Canto V, 28–30, trans. Musa*

into the cab with you, and blows them out of proportion. Usually it doesn't bother him, but it's a relief to get to the end at Stratford, and climb the long straight uphill stretch into the light.

The horses feel like the last straw. They're always there. Just after Buckhurst Hill. Five horses; a marker if you like. Three are black and white; there's a chestnut one that reminds him of the dog he was given, aged ten, as some kind of softener after the divorce; and then there's a white one that always stands in the far corner of the field, away from the rest, like it isn't quite sure of itself.

They are always there; but not today.

He notices patterns. It's something he's tried to explain to Sam, how running the same track every day means he sees the small things, notices the changes. It's the trees he likes best: their endless optimism, the way that even when they're slowing down for the winter they do it in style. And come spring, they're back in the driving seat like nothing's happened, shooting out tight green buds and paper-white blossom. He notices what appears, and what disappears.

He is angry about the play. It was in some theatre under a railway arch, a tiny space with exposed brick walls and a thick black curtain at the back. The entire cast was women – dukes, lords, everybody – which was unnecessary and confusing, in his opinion.

"That's the whole point of it, Jake," Sam had said in the bar afterwards. There was nowhere to sit, so they had to stand by the wall, their jackets collecting dirt at their feet. She had wine-stained lips, dark like dried blood. "It's supposed to take the viewer out of their comfort zone. It's supposed to make you question."

She said it as though he was too stupid to have worked it out himself; that was what annoyed him.

Loughton. Debden. Theydon Bois. There's hardly time for a piss at Epping before he has to change ends and go.

The headache is still there, lurking behind his vision now. Jake lets himself close his eyes for a moment and take a long breath, then he shuts the doors, pushes the start buttons and they're off, westbound. The CCTV images flicker out. The sky's blue, but there's a chill in the air and the cab at this end is drafty as hell.

Adultery. Murder. Justice. A bold reworking of Dante's tale of Francesca and Paolo. The posters outside the theatre had red text printed over a picture of two women kissing. As far as Jake could work out, Francesca was married to some woman dressed as a man, and the husband's brother Paolo – who was also a woman – fell in love with her. They read a book together and at the point where the two people in the book kissed, they kissed too. Stupid, but hardly adultery, he couldn't help thinking. Francesca's husband came in at precisely that moment and wham, bam, murdered the pair of them. The second half was set in hell, which for some reason involved a lot of red velvet sofas, and blackboards, and effects that sounded, he told Sam afterwards, just like driving inside the tunnel.

They're approaching where the horses are meant to be. Jake presses the whistle and the orange-clad men to his left raise their hands in acknowledgement. Most probably, Jake tells himself, the horses have just been taken out for the day. Except it's never happened before, and now, as they near the field, he sees the flash of a white sign over by the fence. Some developer or other, chewing up the countryside. It makes him angry, but there's no-one to tell, and if he doesn't let go of it now, the tunnel will get hold of it and he'll pick an argument with Sam as soon as he gets home, he knows it.

She'll look beautiful in white. He's assuming it's white. In fact, he's assuming the damn thing exists. She's been cagey about it, but then that's tradition, isn't it? Six months to go. A September wedding. There's a fair chance of sun,

and the leaves might just be turning. There are things to sort out, that's what he's been trying to say to her, but every time he tries, their conversation trips up on itself, ties itself in knots. He's asked her if she's had second thoughts; it's to be expected, they can talk it through, he's said, but each time she's just shaken her head, like she feels sorry for him.

The tunnel's close now. He feels his body tense for the snap of darkness, and the scream of metal resounding off the walls. It's like an animal, he thinks, like being inside of an animal and hearing it roar with anger. The edges of the tunnel sit around the train like an endless rib cage. He wonders if snakes have rib cages, and decides they don't.

To be bothered by the horses is stupid. It's just that he liked them. He liked it when they ran, manes flying, as though there wasn't a fence around the field and they could go as far as they wanted. They'll put an ugly block of flats there, whoever 'they' are. He'll watch it grow – yellow-jacketed men and tall white cranes, foundations, breeze blocks, scaffolding; and later on, he'll see curtains appear in the windows, or flags, or pot plants. There'll be bicycles chained to tiny balcony fences, and lines of washing to tell you who's inside. But he'd rather five horses and a square of grass.

After the wedding, they'll move east, out where there's more green to be had, where a person can afford to have a garden and more rooms than the bare minimum. It's what he's always wanted: a wife, two kids, or maybe three, a house in the country. They could have a horse. Bethnal Green station is just visible, a slice of dense yellow light ahead. Nobody looks at him as the train rushes alongside the platform. They tell stories of ghosts here, he's heard – a boy with a gas mask, walking through doors. Jake lifts the handset. *This train is ready to depart. Mind the doors. Mind the closing doors.* They could have a horse, keep it in a field

somewhere close by. The kids could learn to ride when they were old enough.

Liverpool Street. Bank. The feeling's still there. Jake flicks on the light and pulls an apple from his bag. It's disappointing: the flesh floury and tasteless. He takes a couple of half-hearted bites, and ends up dropping it back into his bag. St Paul's. A couple kisses at the far end of the platform; the man has his hand on the small of the woman's back as though worried she'll step away from him.

Chancery Lane. Holborn. Past the ghost of Museum station. Tottenham Court Road. Oxford Circus. Jake stands up, tries to drop his shoulders, lift his chin, straighten out his neck. His reflection is thrown back to him by the glass window.

He looks like his father. Maybe he doesn't look like his father, but at that moment, Jake sees an image he has seen before: his father, his shoulders caved forwards, standing at Jake's bedroom door. There is no good way to explain divorce to a ten year old. I hope you'll understand, when you're older, his father had said – a cop-out, but probably Jake would have done the same. We don't make each other happy like we used to, that was another thing he'd said, but Jake was freefalling at that point; he was heading into the mouth of a dark black tunnel that roared like an animal, and he refused to listen to any more of his father's excuses. There was someone else; he'd found that out soon enough. Maybe all they'd done beforehand was read a book and steal a kiss; it is not something he's ever felt able to ask.

The platform at Bond Street bleaches into view. Someone's left a kiwi fruit for the mice, and one's already chewed through the skin, leaving bright green memories of its teeth. Marble Arch. Lancaster Gate. Queensway. Jake stares at his reflection, but his father's gone. He switches the light off and sits back down, stares into the black space

rushing towards him, the cable-runs like clusters of veins on each side.

He tries to remember the last time he and Sam had a good laugh. It was something that had attracted him to her in the first place, the way she would tip back her head and guffaw – a belly laugh, like a man, like she didn't care what anyone thought about her. Notting Hill Gate. A raft of passengers squeeze themselves into the first two carriages, and the suspension squeals as it inflates to support them. Jack presses his earplugs tighter into his ears. Holland Park. Shepherd's Bush. New Year, he thinks, they'd laughed then – a story about his Sweat Day that he's told a hundred times over. He's grown adept at painting the picture for his audience: a young man, his first day driving alone, struggling to understand what the controllers were saying over the radio; his decision to repeat back something he'd made up, freak them out so they started talking slowly enough for him to pick out the words.

There are options, he sees that. He could accept that perhaps there won't be a dress, or a house with enough space to breathe, or a horse in a field somewhere. He could duck out now, cut his losses, not risk standing at his son's door in ten years' time, trying to explain that the cracks appeared long before he was born; that he's not to blame himself for any of it; that life is like driving a train: you might notice all the thousands of tiny changes happening along the line you travel every day, but chances are you'll miss the things that are out of your field of vision, until it's too late to make things right. Or he could pick up a bunch of flowers on his way home tonight – daffodils, or irises, something colourful. He could cook his lasagne – it's better than his mother's, even his stepdad risks his neck and admits that. He could lay the table in the kitchen like they do in restaurants – white table cloth, folded

napkins. He could make a space for a conversation and see what happens.

The train leaves the tunnel again at White City, and Jake blinks, mole-like, into the spring morning. He writes the shopping list in his head – mince, red wine, bay leaves, onion, garlic, parmesan. He pictures her, sitting opposite him in the kitchen that's too small, really, for a table that size, raising her glass to meet his, lifting back her head and laughing.

**Sarah Butler, inspired by conversations with
Francesca Alaimo, Central line Train Operator**

Talking about the weather

This is my schedule: ten new words every day, one new conversation every week. I collect the words from the newspapers people leave on the seats. I write them into my book, and when I'm back at the house I look them up in my dictionary; I practice until I know them. I have been doing the words ever since I arrived. The conversations are new.

Conversation number one was the man in the shop I buy milk from. "My name, Sylwia," I said to him. He smiled and nodded, but he didn't tell me his name, which made me think that perhaps I'd done it wrong. Number two was my supervisor. "Have you children?" I asked her. "They are rowdy?" Rowdy is a word I learnt from the newspaper, which means something like noisy. She frowned, but said that she did have children, two of them. Then she carried on speaking and I couldn't understand, so I just smiled and nodded until she stopped. All the rest of that day I kept thinking about my mother, and how she'd take us to the beach when we were kids, looking for amber washed up by the sea.

Today will be conversation number three: the weather. It is raining, which is good. I was going to talk to the train driver yesterday but the sun was shining and I couldn't find the right words. They were there, somewhere, but my head gets tangled when I speak to someone new, which is why I have to plan.

I get onto the train when everyone else gets off. I have seventeen minutes to clean it. It isn't an interesting job, but it's work. People call the trains in London the Tube, because they go down big tunnels, like pipes underneath the city. But this station is out in the open. It's called Newbury Park. I say it wrong. I know that because people always correct me. You have to make the "bury" bit sound like "bree", but I keep forgetting. The driver closes the doors and carries on, just a little bit, until we're sitting away

from the platform. You can see a road off to the left with one of the big orange supermarkets at the end. On the right there's a deserted-looking building, sitting up above the tracks behind some trees. I've always liked broken buildings; they remind me of old people – the kind who feel like they've been left behind while the world rushes past them.

When I clean a train, I start from the front end and work my way to the back. By the time I've finished, the driver's walked through to the other cab, so back and front have switched around.

People are messier when it's wet and when it's hot; I've learnt that. When it's hot they leave behind empty drinks cans and torn ice-cream wrappers. The train holds the warmth of their breath and their skin. When it rains, the abandoned newspapers are damp and ripped. The floor's wet and the carriages have a desperate air about them. People forget scarves and umbrellas, and I find gloves, separated from their partners, huddled into tight balls in the corners of the seats.

I am over halfway along the train. I have found nine words, three umbrellas and a black scarf with tiny black beads sewn into flowers you can hardly see. I have saved a newspaper for the driver, a nice, dry one, without the pages curled and ripped. The bag in my right hand is heavy with wet paper. The rain spits against the windows and I feel the cold breath of the wind when I move from one carriage to the next.

The weather is terrible stormy today.

That is my first line. I've practised it in front of the mirror. "Stormy" I got from the newspaper – I try and add the words into my conversations, but it isn't easy. In my house there are seven other people, all of them Polish, some of them from Middle Pomerania where I grew up, next to the sea. They seem so loud and confident, I haven't dared to ask any of them to help me.

Three carriages left. Five minutes. Usually the driver would have walked through by now. I didn't see him – usually it's a him – as the train pulled in, so I'm not sure who it is today. Sometimes they don't say anything, just walk straight past; other times they smile and say hello. I've started to recognise some of them. Yesterday it was the one with dark grey hair and a kind face. He would have been good to talk to, but the sun was shining.

I am listening out for whoever it is today, when I find the necklace. It's on the floor, just to the right of the middle set of doors. I imagine a woman collecting up her bags, concentrating on her escape route between the crowded-in passengers, not feeling the chain snap and fall. It's a delicate necklace, and these trains are noisy, so she wouldn't have heard it land. I drop the silver links into my palm, and place the pendant on top. The amber's been shaped into a tear drop. There's no plant or insect inside, so it won't have been expensive. A leaf or a spider suspended inside the sea-worn, yellowed shapes were the biggest prizes of all. Find one of those and my mother would be happy for days.

I wish I still had it. I can picture it – a long, fat piece of amber with the tiny ant curled in on itself at the very top. The ant was perfect – six thin legs, two antennae and each section of its body intact – the fat pointed end, the skinny waist. It would have fetched a good price, I knew that, but I wanted it for myself more than anything else in the world. Our house wasn't the kind of place you could hide things in, which is why I crawled into the disused hut just back from the sand dunes, prised up a rotting floorboard and tucked the piece of amber out of harm's way. The hut was a place my sister and I used to make up ghost stories about. We would dare each other to run up and just touch it; but suddenly it became a place of refuge. I would slip away from our beach-combing trips and sit in its dark, damp corners, cradling the ant in its sugary trap between both my palms.

I am thinking about this when I hear a door slam, and I turn round and the driver's walking towards me, which is why I curl my fingers over the necklace – no other reason. I'm not someone who pockets the valuable things they find; I hand them straight in. I've got plans for myself, so there's no point messing up over things like that.

I'm not ready. I can feel the English words trying to escape from my mind. I put my hand down by my side and take a breath.

"Hello, the weather is terrible stormy today." It comes out in a rush. It sounds all wrong.

The driver stops and looks at me. His skin is warm brown, his hair plaited into wiry lines. He is shorter than me. I want to ask him where in the world he is tied to, whether he was born with English in his mouth or if he had to try and find room for it amongst all the other words. He frowns at me, like he hasn't understood. I take a breath and try again.

"The weather is terrible stormy today." I feel the colour race up my cheeks.

He looks at the rain drawing lines across the windows, then looks back at me. "It's terrible, you're right," he says. "Though I'm not sure about the storm."

"Tomorrow it is better, maybe." This is sentence number two. There is only one left.

He purses his lips. "You might be right there." He nods as he speaks and his plaits dance against his head.

I want to open my palm and show him the necklace. I want to tell him about the ant caught in the amber, how I used to talk to it sometimes, tell it things, and how one day, when I was sitting with it in the hut, my sister tracked me down and it was too late to hide it, how she got extra dessert for a week and I had to bite back the tears so my mother wouldn't ask why. I want to ask him if it's lonely, sitting in that cab, driving into the dark. And if it is lonely,

whether it's the good kind, like you get when you stand on an empty beach and look out at the sea, or the bad kind like when you sit in a room on your own in a house full of people you don't know, wishing that the sound of the buses' heavy breathing outside your window was the sound of waves against the shore.

"Yes", he nods. "Maybe tomorrow will be brighter. I've not heard the forecast."

I have forgotten sentence number three. I smile and nod. "Best get going", he says. "No rest for the wicked."

I smile and nod again, because if I say anything else it will be wrong, and even if it isn't, the tears will still come out. I hold out the newspaper and he takes it. It's called *The Sun*. I look at the thick red letters and I remember, now, that "sunny" is the word I could have used yesterday. I stand to one side and he walks past. I can smell the aftershave on his skin. I watch him walk through the next carriage, and the next, until he reaches the cab door, and disappears.

I hold the rubbish bag in the same hand as the necklace and hurry myself up. I'm in the last carriage when he starts up the train again, and once we're back at the platform I've finished my work. He opens the doors for me and I step onto the rain-stained concrete. Usually I go straight out to the bins. Today I put the bag down next to the nearest bench and walk up towards his cab. The rain feels like cold fingers on my skin. He doesn't notice me at first. I have to tap my nails on the window. He snaps round to see who it is; when he opens the door I realise I haven't planned any words. I open my hand and hold it towards him.

"You found this?" He lifts up the chain. The pendant swings beneath his fingers.

I nod and point behind me towards the carriages.

"It's weird this stuff, isn't it? Amber." He holds the amber closer to his face, and I remember my mother, examining each piece we brought back to her as though it might hold

a secret. I want to tell him about her. I want to tell him how difficult it was to leave, and how if I went back, it would be like giving up. He's concentrating on the chain now, trying to push the links back together.

"There", he says. The necklace is whole again. "Good as new." He hands it to me. "Lost property", he says, the words slow and spaced out. "You know what to do with lost property?"

I nod. He smiles at me and closes the door. An elderly couple hurry along the platform and onto the train, leaning towards each other underneath a black umbrella. I feel the rain on my hair and on the backs of my clenched fists. The train pulls away and I watch it go. The amber is warm from his touch. I sit on the bench, next to the bag of rubbish, and lay the chain across my knee. I have already decided: I will wear the necklace, just for today. I am not a thief. Tomorrow I will hand it in to my supervisor and she will fill in a form and send it to lost property along with the umbrellas and the black scarf with its tiny black flowers. I will wear it just for today. I open the clasp and lift my hands up and around my neck. The teardrop sits in the centre of my chest; I pull at my collar to hide it from view. I watch the rain falling and decide that tonight I will write a letter to my mother. I will tell her my English is getting better. I will tell her that the women in England wear amber and it reminds me of home. I take my notebook from my jacket pocket, and open it to today's page. I have nine words already. I find my pen and write: *10. Amba?*

Tonight, once I have learnt my words, I will plan conversation number four. I do not know who I will choose to talk to yet, but I have a whole week to decide.

**Sarah Butler, inspired by conversations with
Jerry Semple, Central line Train Operator**

Central line whispers

Central line whispers evolved as a way to use writing and stories to connect the staff along the whole line. Travelling along the length of the line, I visited each of the 45 stations managed by the Central line, from West Ruislip to Epping. At each station, I worked with at least one member of staff to co-write a section of this story.

The only constraint was that the story should follow the shape of the line: to do this, we developed two characters who meet where the two west branches of the line merge at North Acton and separate where the line splits at Leytonstone. They then reunite at Woodford, where the line joins up again and the story ends in Epping. Other than that, control over the story's content was in the hands of the staff who took part.

The week was a remarkable experience. Starting at West Ruislip on Monday morning, I arrived in Epping on Friday afternoon with a 7,000 word story: a roller-coaster ride of twists and turns, authored by a grand total of 55 people. The staff were generous with their time and ideas. As the narrative became more complicated, they patiently listened as I explained the plot, before throwing themselves into developing the story. As I moved along the line, the story shifted and changed as staff responded to each other's ideas and added their own personalities and concerns. There is certainly no lack of imagination on the Central line!

Sarah Butler

It's a Monday morning. Spring. Fiona spoons instant coffee into the tall white mug she uses every morning. Her mum's frying bacon and making sandwiches at the same time – six slices of bread in a neat row on the kitchen counter. Cheese. Mayonnaise. Thin slices of pale tomato. Fiona will throw hers away as soon as she leaves the house, but she's learned it's not something worth arguing about.

“Bacon, Fiona?”

Fiona ignores her, and takes a packet of rye crackers down from the cupboard. She lifts off the top piece. They dry out her mouth, but she's got used to that.

C. Lawrence and Robert Carter at West Ruislip

Her dad's at the table, a cup of tea in front of him, waiting for his breakfast. He smiles at Fiona.

“Are you ready for your big day, hon?”

He's wearing the suit she bought him for his birthday, and the blue tie with the dinosaur skeletons. He's had that tie since he started his job at the National History Museum. These days, he only wears it for special occasions.

Follow your dreams, love – that's what he's always told her, and it's not that she hasn't tried. But she's twenty-eight, and still living at home; she's beginning to wonder how her dream will become reality. So far, the biggest audience she's ever sung to has been at the local community centre, and that was mainly friends and family anyway; it isn't enough.

Neil Hood at Ruislip Gardens

Today everything is going to change. Two weeks ago, Fiona had been selling chocolate bars to people who didn't even bother to meet her eye, listening to her boss brag about his children. Last week, she'd told him she'd had enough and wasn't going to work in his overheated, over-priced shop for one minute more.

“And what are you planning to do then?” he’d asked, his lips curling into a sneer which said he didn’t believe she could do anything other than sell chocolate.

“I’m going to sing,” she’d said, and in order to stop him from laughing, she’d carried on talking. “I’ll start on the Underground, on one of those busker spaces. Two years and I’ll be on TV. You’ll see.”

It didn’t stop him from laughing, but when she went home and told her dad, he’d smiled and nodded and asked her when she was going to start.

Mufaro Mapanda at South Ruislip

“I don’t know what’s got into you, Fiona.” Her mother wraps the cheese and tomato sandwiches in thick swathes of cling-film and hands one to Fiona. “You’re walking round with your head in the clouds, just like your dad used to.”

Fiona catches her dad’s eye and he winks. He knows what’s going to happen today. Four days ago, she’d come home from her audition, shaking with relief, her licence tucked safely into the zipped-up inside pocket of her bag. They’d decided not to tell her mum. They both knew what happened when she got her bee in a bonnet about something.

Trudy Campbell at Northholt

Fiona decides it’s time to go. She pulls on her jacket – the green military one her mum hates, and slips a stash of crackers into the inside pocket. She runs up to her room, grabs the portable CD player and the Amy Winehouse backing track. She takes a quick look round – it’s the same room she’s slept in since they moved to West Ruislip twenty-five years ago – and suddenly a feeling of dread takes hold of her. Maybe her boss is right; maybe she’s just going to make a fool of herself. But then she looks at the photo of her great aunt, who was musical theatre star when it was

harder for women to follow their dreams, and realises she has to at least try.

Outside, it’s one of those blue-skied spring days. Fiona turns out of the drive, drops the sandwiches into the bin by the bus stop, and soon she’s caught up with all the other commuters making their way to the Tube. Standing on the station she looks around. She wants someone to smile at her, but everyone’s expressionless. She wants to turn to the business man standing next to her and tell him that today’s the day her life changes, but she doesn’t have the courage.

David Bowyer at Greenford

Ruislip Gardens. South Ruislip. Northholt. Greenford. As they pass Perivale, Fiona smiles. She remembers bunking off school and running through the station gates to stand outside the house of some one-hit wonder who lived nearby. She can’t remember the name of the band, but she remembers the house. It was nothing special, a red-brick semi with net curtains and a green front door. There’d be crowds of them, holding their posters, wearing their badges, and swapping made-up stories about conversations they could only have dreamt of having. Busking in a corner of a Tube station is hardly glamorous, she thinks, as the train pulls out from Shepherd’s Bush station, but it’s a start.

Neasha Watts and Charles Taylor at Perivale

The piece of paper wrapped around her licence says *Bond St station 9.00 – 11.00, Bank station 12.00 – 14.00, Oxford Circus 17.00 – 18.00. Report to Station Supervisor*. As the train pulls into Bond Street, Fiona picks up the CD player – her fingers sticky with sweat around the plastic handle – and steps onto the platform. There’s a woman in an orange jacket wearing a name badge.

“I’m looking for the Supervisor’s office,” Fiona says.

She is sent through the station to a blue door. She presses the bell and as she waits for an answer she thinks again that perhaps the best thing would be to leave, to retreat to West Ruislip and ask for her job back.

Erica Ferreira at Hanger Lane

“Who’s there?” A man’s voice crackles through the silver intercom.

“Fiona. Fiona. I’m a busker.” She can hear the shake in her own voice.

Inside, a man in a white shirt and dark blue blazer bombards her with questions. “Your ID, Miss. You’ve been here before? Do you know the evacuation procedure? What time are you booked in?”

She signs her name, and hands over her licence.

“I hope you’re not going to make too much noise,” he says. “I don’t want customers complaining.”

It’s hardly the big time. She can’t imagine teenagers queuing up outside her house demanding her autograph. But it’s a start, she tells herself.

There’s a vinyl sticker in the shape of a semi-circle on the floor, up against the tiled wall. Fiona stands in the middle and sets up her CD player. It looks tiny all of a sudden.

Track one. *Rebab*.

She takes a deep breath, and starts to sing.

Fuad Hassen at North Acton

Heathrow Airport. The fluorescent lights glint off polished floor tiles. Diamonds sparkle behind toughened glass, and high-heeled shoes wait for bored shoppers on low white benches.

Carlos rubs at his eyes. It was a twelve-hour flight, and the man in the seat next to him had taken up all the space and snored like some kind of hog. Carlos isn’t a small man

himself, years of drinking have gone into his figure, but he was slim compared to this guy.

He’d watched movies. *Slumdog Millionaire*. *XMen*. He hadn’t been able to concentrate on any of them. All he could hear was the man snoring. All he could think about was Maria’s face when she realised he was leaving.

Bhupen Pandya at Ealing Broadway

There are too many signs, too many people. Carlos’s English is good, but he feels disorientated all the same. Eventually he finds a train platform, and gets himself a ticket. It’s the kind of city a person can get lost in, he tells himself as the train starts to fill up. He can do what he needs to do without attracting attention to himself. All the same, if he can get lost here, so could she.

He’s not sure how Maria worked out that he was planning to leave. Maybe he left a receipt or something, somewhere in the house, but as the airport coach pulled out of the station in São Paulo, he saw her running after him, hair flying, a coat pulled over her nightdress. By then it was too late. The kids will look out for her, he tells himself now; she will look out for them. They’ll be OK.

Stephen Rout at West Acton

The map of the Underground looks like a mass of multi-coloured ribbons. Carlos scans the station names, looking for one he recognises. Piccadilly Circus. Leicester Square. Green Park. A memory clicks into focus. Green Park. The Ritz. He’s worked in hotels before. He’ll go straight there – ask for a job. At least then he can find himself somewhere to stay, steady himself a bit.

It’s not a success. He is passed from uniformed person to uniformed person. They look down at him as though he’s not worth anything. He ducks into the toilets before he leaves and, assessing himself in the mirror, he can see

their point. He's dishevelled, tired, there's a tea stain on his shirt, and you can tell that the sports bag he's carrying is heavy.

He goes back underground because he can't think of anything else to do. He follows long, brightly lit corridors, not really caring where he's going. Another train: Jubilee Northbound. He stares at his reflection in the curved window; two versions – one upside down, one the right way up.

Ray McSharry at East Acton

The train pulls to a halt. Carlos stares out at the platform. Bond Street. There's a pause. The doors don't open. People on the train start to shuffle impatiently. The tannoy crackles.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, I've just been advised that, due to a security alert, I need to detrain. Please exit the train and leave the station. This train will terminate here. I repeat, please leave this train." The voice is calm.

Carlos watches the passengers, and listens to the sudden hissed conversations between strangers as they hurry onto the platform. He stands and lets himself be led by the crowd. The corridors are thick with bodies. Staff in orange jackets direct with their hands. They look nervous, but they're smiling.

He doesn't see the woman bending to pick up the CD player from the floor until he's fallen into her.

Matthew Lewis at White City

"I'm sorry," he says. "I'm sorry." There are people crowding round them, but Carlos stops and bends down, takes her arm and pulls her up. She has tears in her eyes. They're green, like Maria's. He wants to wipe the tears away but instead he lets go of her arm.

"Are you OK?"

She doesn't say anything, just shrugs.

"Keep moving, keep moving," shouts a man in a blue jacket.

And so they walk, pushed together up steep stairs and out into the light. The crowd swills along and they both move with it; they find themselves walking side by side.

"Do you mind?" Carlos says.

"What do you mean?" She sounds angry.

"If I walk with you?"

Emile Mbeka at Shepherd's Bush

Fiona shakes her head and speeds up. A minute more and she'll be gone. He's not sure why, maybe it's because he's tired, maybe it's because now that he's arrived, he's frightened of what he came here to do, but whatever the reason, he doesn't want to lose her.

"I liked your singing," he says. It's a guess, but a lucky one because she stops.

"I'm Carlos."

"Fiona." She looks at him suspiciously, but she doesn't walk off.

"Do you write your own songs?" he asks.

She frowns at him, and tugs her ponytail. He can still see the tears at the edges of her eyes.

"I'm wondering if I can help you," he says.

Famujimi Adeyemi at Holland Park

"Help me? How can you help me?" Fiona asks.

"I've got something for you." Carlos fumbles in his bag. He'd packed in a rush, and secretly so Maria wouldn't know what he was planning, but he'd packed the songs. He hasn't written in a long time, and these were songs he thought of burning once, but in the end he'd shoved them into his bag. "I've written this. I think you'll sing it beautifully," he says.

She takes the paper. “Thank you,” she says, but she’s frowning. “Why have you given it to me? Out of everyone?”

Carlos shrugs. “There’s something about you. I can’t explain it, but I’m drawn to you. I want to hear you sing this song.”

Nichola Malcolm at Notting Hill Gate

He looks almost as old as her dad, Fiona thinks. His hair could do with a wash. He can speak English, but his voice is thick with an accent she’s not sure of. But maybe he’s right; maybe he could help her.

“It’s ruined,” she says to him. “Today was supposed to be the day that I started my new life. I was busking, you know busking?”

He nods, though she’s not sure he understands.

“And then the evacuation, and now I haven’t got my licence or anything – it’s in the office.”

He smiles at her then.

“Do you know that today’s the day I start my new life too? Why don’t we find you another place to sing?”

Ade Olukoya at Queensway

“Where?” asks Fiona.

“I’m not sure yet,” says Carlos. “But will you sing this song I’ve written if we find somewhere else?”

Fiona pauses, and after a moment or two she nods. They stroll along Oxford Street and find an empty bench close to Oxford Circus station. Both seated, Fiona starts to study the song; Carlos looks on eagerly. Before long, Fiona turns to him.

“Is this song about you?” she asks. “Did these things happen to you?”

Carlos becomes uneasy. He tries to change the subject, but Fiona continues to probe. Eventually Carlos stands up and grabs the song back from her.

“I’m sorry,” he says. “I should never have asked you. Please forgive me.” He turns and heads off down the steps of Oxford Circus station.

“No, wait,” Fiona shouts, but Carlos continues down the stairs.

Keith Pearce and Steve Brown at Lancaster Gate

Through the barriers, she can just see him running down the escalators. She doesn’t stop to ask herself why she’s following him – there’s no time. At the bottom, he turns right, and Fiona does the same, but she’s losing him amongst all the people. More escalators. He’s too far ahead. She tries to push past the man in front, but he blocks her way.

“Excuse me.”

“Wait your turn, lady.”

She tries to look past him. Carlos has gone.

At the bottom of the stairs she can see both platforms. There’s a train at each, people pouring into them.

She can’t see him. He must be on one of the trains. Fiona stands, frozen between both platforms.

Mind the closing doors, mind the closing doors. She looks up in panic. The train doors to her left beep, and without thinking she runs, pushing through the doors as they snap shut behind her.

He’s not there. She makes her way along the carriage, scanning faces. It’s not until she’s at the very end, and has almost given up, that she sees him, sitting in the next carriage with his head in his hands.

Alan Parkinson at Marble Arch

At the next station, Fiona slips out of the doors and hurries down the platform to the neighbouring carriage.

“Carlos?” She touches his shoulder and he looks up.

“Let’s at least go for a drink,” she says. “Let’s at least have a conversation. I’m having a bad day. It looks like you are too.”

He shrugs. The woman next to him stands up and Fiona takes the empty seat. They sit in silence. St Paul's. Bank. Liverpool Street. Carlos sits back and rubs at his eyes.

"It's just you remind me of my wife. I'm sorry," he says.

"You'll have a drink with me?"

"OK."

They get off at Bethnal Green and emerge onto a busy crossroads. Fiona walks into the first pub she sees: The Salmon and Ball.

She buys him a beer and they sit opposite each other across a small round table.

"Go on then," Fiona says. "Tell me what's going on with you."

Mohbub Hussain at Bond Street

Carlos looks at the girl sitting across from him.

"Do you know who your parents are?" he says.

She frowns. "Of course. Ethel and Fred Johnson. They live in West Ruislip. Why?"

Carlos remembers when he would have given a similarly confident answer.

"I found my birth certificate," he tells her. "I was planning to take Maria and the boys to America. Disney World – they'd have loved it. I'd got a promotion, you see, was making a bit of extra money. It would have been the first time out of Brazil for all of us. My mum didn't want to give me the certificate, but she couldn't really say no, could she?"

The girl sips her drink and stares at him.

"It was in a brown envelope. My first name was on the birth certificate, but there was a different surname."

The girl nods. "Adopted," she says.

Andy Fuller at Holborn

Carlos's mother had burst into tears when he'd confronted her. He'd shouted, he admits that. He'd thrown words at her that were too hard and angry for a woman who'd loved him his whole life. Later, he'd changed tactics, made her coffee the way she liked it, wheedled, begged, even cried himself.

Slowly, the story came out. An English father, working in Brazil. A Brazilian mother. The woman he'd grown up calling Mama had been his nurse. She'd been taken on when they'd been born. *They*, because there was a girl too, an older sister they'd called Soriano.

There were floods most years, she'd told him, but never like that before, the whole town up to its neck in water. Afterwards, they'd searched the wrecked buildings for bodies. They'd found both of his parents' bodies, but not his sister's.

"I'd been given a duty of care," she told him. "I promised to look after you. So I took the papers from your parents' house, and I brought you up as my son. I looked for your sister, Carlos, but I never found her."

It had been too much information to take in all at the same time, and Carlos found, when he went home that evening, that he couldn't find the words to tell Maria.

Barry Drew at Chancery Lane

"I didn't tell my wife," he says to Fiona. "I was going to, but then I found out the rest – about my father – and I just didn't know where to start."

"Does she know where you are?" Fiona asks.

Carlos shrugs. "She will be okay."

Fiona raises her eyebrows.

"It was all in those papers she'd rescued. My mum can't read English that well, and she'd never thought to get them translated," he says. "There were two marriage certificates. Letters from another wife in England. So many lies. I don't

know why he kept all the evidence. Maybe he wanted to get caught, maybe he just didn't care."

"So you came to find her?" Fiona asks.

Carlos lets himself smile. "It's crazy, really. It was all a long long time ago. But I've got a name – Sylvia Delman, and an address. Here." He pulls a scrap of paper from his pocket.

Susan Dell at St. Paul's

Fiona takes the paper from him and something about the way she tucks a strand of hair behind her ear as she reads reminds him of Maria. He imagines her in their apartment in São Paulo, cooking *feijoada*. He can picture the three of them at the table, the boys in their white and black school uniforms. Three plates of rice, black beans mixed up with sausages and dried meat; three oranges lined up on the counter for dessert. He doesn't want to think about whether she's crying or not.

"He must have been a rich man," Fiona says. "This address is in Mayfair. Are you going to go and find her?"

"That was my intention when I came here. But now I'm wondering, is it a good idea? How's she going to react if I tell her? Does she even know that I exist?"

Matteo Paciletti and Ishret Rashid at Bank

"You've got to at least try," Fiona says. "You can't come all this way and not try."

Carlos finishes his beer. "You'll come with me?"

"I don't know. I've got to find my licence. I'm supposed to be singing."

"At least for the beginning. You'll show me where to go?"

He looks so lonely and fed up she says yes, and they walk together back to the Tube. Carlos stops at the top of the stairs. "Look," he says. There's a copper-coloured plaque on the wall above the stairs. *173 dead, 3rd March 1943. Not forgotten.*

"I've heard there's a ghost here," Fiona says. "My dad's got a friend who saw it. A little boy with a gas mask round his neck. Long grey socks, grey shorts. My dad's friend went to ask if he was ok and the boy just walked straight through a door and disappeared. I mean it's rubbish, obviously, but ..."

Carlos turns round. "Not rubbish," he says. "I have seen ghosts before."

Stewart Potticary and Andy Sears at Bethnal Green

Fiona follows him down the stairs. On the platform Carlos turns to her.

"First time it happened, I was a kid," he says. "I was playing football against the wall at the back of our house. I looked in the kitchen window and there was a woman there, blonde hair in a ponytail, a bit like yours. She had a pink baseball cap on. But there was no-one in the house except my mum."

"What was she doing? The blonde woman?"

"Just looking. And then there have been other things too. Footsteps, voices, a dustbin lid at work, which lifted itself off the bin and spun all the way across the office."

A train pulls in and they jump on. "Some people see them," Carlos says. "Some people don't."

Gary Brown at Mile End

"You need to change at Bond Street," Fiona tells him.

"I'll get off there. I have to get my licence back. Get out at Green Park."

He says nothing.

Fiona takes the song from her bag. The paper's curled up at the edges. She starts to sing under her breath:

If you get knocked down, you can rise again.

And again, and again, and again.

She looks at Carlos. He's tapping his fingers against his knees like he's playing the piano, though it's probably just

that he's nervous. She could get off at Bond Street and never see him again. Instead, she carefully rips a strip of paper from the bottom of the song sheet and writes down her name and mobile number.

"Will you let me know what happens?" she says, handing him the paper.

He studies it for a moment, then folds it into a tiny square and pushes it into his jeans pocket. "I'll tell you," he says.

Olubumny Ossai at Leyton

At Bond Street he watches her walk up the escalator. He waits, and as she reaches the top she looks back at him. He raises his hand, just for a second. She does the same and then she's gone.

He calls her as soon as he gets out at Green Park. It goes to answer-phone.

"Thanks for your number, Fiona. I enjoyed talking to you. I'm thinking, we could meet for dinner? I can tell you what happens?" He hangs up and takes out the piece of paper with the address of the woman he's not sure if he's ready to meet.

Minesh Shah at Leytonstone

The house is an elegant white terrace. Black and red tiles line the path up to the front door and two neatly cut green shrubs stand to attention in a narrow front garden. The door's painted chocolate brown, with four multi-coloured glass panels. Carlos rings the bell and a dog starts to yap. He sees a shape moving towards him. It's distorted by the glass, but he can tell it's a child.

As soon as the door opens, the dog runs out. It's white, with thick wiry hair, a flat face and short stocky legs. The shape turns out to be a boy, maybe seven years old. He runs past Carlos, after the dog.

"Casper, Casper, come here."

He lifts his face towards Carlos. "He's a naughty dog," he says. "He's always trying to run away. Who are you?"

Lloyd Nelson at Wanstead

"I'm Carlos. Can I speak to your mum?"

"She's gone to the shops, but my nan's here." The boy turns his back on Carlos and shouts in the house. "Nan? Nan? There's a man for you."

Carlos considers leaving, but there's a woman walking towards him along the hallway. She wears a brown and white shirt, and a brown silk scarf around her neck. Her long black hair is streaked with grey. She uses a walking stick with a polished handle, but she still walks tall. She must be in her sixties, but she's looking good for it.

"My name's Carlos. I'm sorry to disturb you," he says. "I'm looking for Sylvia Delman."

She takes a short step back and frowns. "Who did you say you were again?"

"I'm Carlos, from Brazil."

The woman turns to the boy. "Go to your room, Jake, I need to talk to this man for a minute."

The boy pulls a face, but leaves, pulling the dog after him. The woman looks at Carlos. She lowers her voice and says, "That was all a long time ago, we don't need to drag it up again."

She's about to close the door.

"Please," Carlos says. "I just want to find out more about my father."

Wade Williams at Redbridge

The woman looks at the man standing on her front doorstep and the memories flood back to her. She'd been young, in love, and Harold had been a convincing liar. They'd married in secret, he'd insisted on it, and she'd been

so desperate to be his wife she'd agreed. He was a business man, so the long periods he spent in Brazil had been excusable. He would write letters telling her how much he missed her, and send flowers every weekend. She was lonely at first, but when the baby came, it got easier.

This man must be his son, with the other woman she'd only found out about when it was too late to ask him why. She's too old for this, she decides.

"Sylvia was my sister," she said. "She's dead. I've nothing more to say."

She watches his face fall. "I'm sorry," she says. "I have to go."

"Can you tell me about her?" Carlos asks.

"I have to go."

"I can give you my number?" He scrabbles in his bag, writes a row of numbers in messy blue biro on a scrap of paper and thrusts it into her hand.

She watches him walk away from the house, his shoulders hunched forward.

Richard French, Tony McCarthy and Seth Twum at Gants Hill

It's two days later. Sylvia's in the garden, weeding the flower beds. The daffodils are almost over, but the petunias are flowering, purple and pink. She will call him today, she's decided. She has to, if only for Soriano's sake.

She uses the house phone; he answers straight away.

"Do you know Harrods?" she shouts. He's somewhere noisy – she can hardly hear him. "There's a coffee shop just opposite the entrance. I'll meet you there, tomorrow at 11am."

Astab Hussain and Alan Williams at Newbury Park

Carlos wakes early the next morning. The sun is just bleaching the sky. Despite his wish for anonymity, he'd

looked up an old friend; just a couple of nights, he'd asked, just a sofa's fine. But luck was on his side, and Bruno – a boy he played football with as a child – was already planning a holiday. Carlos has the apartment for a fortnight. He won't stay a day longer; he was brought up not to overstretch his welcome. The station is a ten-minute walk from Bruno's place. The man in the ticket office tells Carlos the best way into town.

It's a cloudy day, with a bite in the air. Carlos makes his way to the green and gold frontage of Harrods and looks around. The woman is sitting in the window of the café right opposite the main shop doors. Her walking stick is propped up against her chair. She's wearing a dark red jumper and her hair is loose across her shoulders.

He sits opposite her and they look at each other. Eventually, she nods and says,

"I've been angry for years, Carlos, angrier than you can imagine, but the fact remains he was good to me. I don't know why he did what he did, why he lied, how he could keep up the pretence, but still, he was a good man, I believe that. And he could dance like no other man I've ever met. Maybe that's where Soriano got her ear for rhythm."

Winfield Maynard at Barkingside

"Soriano?" Carlos rubs at his eyes. "I don't understand."

The woman stares past him, as though trying to see something too far away to focus on. "I'm Sylvia," she says. "I lied because I didn't want to drag all this history up again. But then I changed my mind, because of your sister."

"I thought she died in the flood," Carlos says weakly.

"I went out to Brazil, as soon as I heard about the disaster. I left Annie with my mother." Sylvia shakes her head. "I never expected to find what I did – that he was dead and there was another wife, and two other children I'd known nothing about. I went to the police with his name,

and they gave Soriano to me. She talked about you for years Carlos, wanting to know where you were, what happened to you, but I didn't know what to tell her."

Hafsat Usman at Fairlop

Carlos sits in silence for a long time. His coffee grows cold. The woman is watching him, but he has no idea what to say, what to do.

"So that boy, in your house, he's Soriano's?"

Sylvia shakes her head. "He's Annie's boy. Soriano's not married. She lives a different kind of life." She smiles.

"She's a singer, jazz and that, she's done well for herself."

"She's in London?"

Sylvia nods. "She'll want to meet you, I'm sure. Do you want me to talk to her?"

Abul Hassan at Hainault

Speaker's Corner, Hyde Park. Carlos arrives an hour early. There's a man wearing red boots and a long black coat, who stands on a wooden box and talks about the end of the world. Carlos stops and listens for a while, then moves on. He sits on the green bench by the roller-blade park and scans the face of every woman who walks past.

She's late by twenty minutes. He knows it's her before she's said anything. She has the same eyes as him, the same dark brown hair, except there are flashes of copper in hers.

"Soriano?" he says.

She smiles, and he feels the weight and the upset of the last week slide from his shoulders.

"I thought you were dead," she says.

Anthony Peltier at Grange Hill

"I thought you were too."

They stare at each other. It's an uncomfortable silence. Carlos gets to his feet. She moves first, wraps her arms

around him, and squeezes tight. Carlos feels the tears at the back of his eyes.

"Let's walk," he says. "We've got a lot to talk about."

He lets her talk first, and even when it starts to rain – a light drizzle coating their faces – they carry on walking.

"I was only four," she tells him. "I can't remember much about Brazil, but I remember you, my little brother. You were such a noisy kid, and I always had to keep you occupied."

Carlos laughs. "I was too young to remember anything. I didn't even know you existed until a couple of months ago. Your mum says you're passionate about singing?"

"I've been singing ever since I left Brazil. It reminds me of home," she says.

Robert Weedon at Chigwell

"How did you become a professional singer?" Carlos asks her.

Soriano smiles at him. "I was lucky," she says. "Sylvia encouraged me; she put me forward for all kinds of things. I was fourteen, and in a play at the Barbican, some youth production or other. There was an agent there who spotted me, and after that everything just went from strength to strength. I've got a gig tonight, Carlos. Why don't you come?"

"Of course. I want to spend as much time with you as possible, Soriano. I need to tell you, I don't have much time."

"You're going back to Brazil?" she asks.

Carlos shakes his head, "No, I don't have much time," he says. "I'm not well."

Scott Grant at Roding Valley

By the time Fiona gets home after her first day busking she's exhausted. Happy exhausted. Bank was difficult, so many

blank faces passing by, but it picked up at Oxford Circus. Maybe she was just more confident, but there were more smiles, and more pound coins clinking into the black scarf at her feet.

She runs straight up to her room to count her earnings. She piles the coins into neat stacks.

£48.67

Her parents are sitting in the living room watching TV. Her dad turns round as she walks in, “Good day at work, love?” he asks and winks.

“I didn’t go to work,” she says.

Her dad sits up straight then, looks at her mum.

“I busked today, mum,” Fiona says. “I’m going to be a singer, I’ve decided.”

Her mum’s neck snaps around. “You are going to do no such thing, Fiona Johnson.” She’s on her feet.

“I’ve decided.” Fiona folds her arms. “You can’t stop me.”

“I can stop you while you’re living in my house, young lady.”

Her dad tries to calm the whole thing down, but he doesn’t succeed.

“It’s too late,” Fiona tells him, when he comes up to her room that evening. She’s packing a bag with her favourite clothes. She agrees she’ll wait until the morning. He gives her a wad of twenty pound notes and asks her to call him as soon as she’s found somewhere to stay.

David Gething and Stevie Campbell at Snaresbrook

Susie and Charlotte tell her she can stay as long as she needs to, but she knows she’s in the way. Every morning she folds up her sleeping bag and shoves it down the back of the sofa, out of sight. She helps out as much as she can: cooks, vacuums, cleans the bathroom, even though it’s already clean. She makes sure she’s out most of the day. When she hasn’t got a busking slot, she walks across the city.

Sometimes she’ll busk on a busy street corner, until she gets moved on. She always starts with Carlos’s song.

She’s had so many missed calls from her parents she’s lost count. She’ll call them at the weekend, she’s decided, but for now they can just wait. She leaves her phone on silent all day so she doesn’t have to listen to it ring, which means she misses Carlos’s call too. She has to wade through fifteen anxious messages from her mum and dad to get to the one he’s left her. He wants to meet her, introduce her to someone whose name she can’t quite catch. Smollensky’s on the Strand. 9pm. Tonight.

Colin Rayment and Perry Bird at South Woodford

There are two bouncers on the door, big men in smart grey suits, each wearing an ear-piece. Inside it’s dark. Dim lamps with red velvet shades sit on small circular tables. There’s a narrow stage with a drum kit and a man tuning up a double bass. The place is crowded with people, and it takes her a while to find Carlos, sitting on his own at one of the tables. He looks up at her and smiles.

“Fiona, how are you?”

She takes the stool opposite him and sits down. “Who did you want me to meet?” she asks. “I didn’t catch the name.”

“You’ll see. She’s on next. Look.”

A woman walks onto the stage. She’s tall, with long dark hair that glints copper in the stage lights. She starts to sing and the whole room sits in silence, transfixed. In the break between sets Carlos tells Fiona his story – how he found Sylvia, and then Soriano, the sister he thought had died in the flood.

At the end of the night, Fiona follows Carlos to the dressing rooms, her heart in her mouth.

“You will sing for her,” he says. “She will help you.”

Juan Carlos Castelo at Woodford

It's a success. Fiona sings Carlos's song and even though she's nervous, Soriano nods as she's singing, and when she's done, Soriano offers to introduce her to a club manager she knows well.

"They'll love you," she says.

Fiona can't stop smiling. She buys Carlos a drink to say thank you. He buys her another. It's late, the Tube has stopped and she doesn't know how she'll get home, but she doesn't care.

She's not quite sure how it happened, she knows he's a married man and she's always thought of herself as a girl with morals. Maybe it was the vodka, or the fact that her dreams suddenly seem within reaching distance, or what he told her about his illness. Either way, when she hears the banging on the door the next morning, she opens her eyes and realises what's happened.

Carlos goes to open the door, and as soon as he's left the room, she grabs her clothes and gets dressed. Her hangover stabs at her temples. She wishes she was at home, with her mum frying bacon for breakfast. It's only when she hears the name "Maria," that she realises just what a mess they've got themselves into.

Warren Melia at Buckhurst Hill

Maria is furious, her eyes like flames, her teeth bared as she throws sharp-edged words at Carlos. He's nothing, she tells him, worse than nothing. He'll never see her or his boys again. He doesn't want to contemplate what she had to do to get enough money to come over here and find him. He thinks about Fiona, and suddenly it strikes him – he's the same as his father: two countries, two women. He looks at Maria; she's beautiful when she's angry.

"How are the boys?" he asks.

"Like you care," she snaps. "They cry for you every night, but what do you care about that?"

Andrew Cunningham at Loughton

"I bet you've got a woman in there, haven't you? I bet that's what all this is about," Maria shouts.

He's never been a good liar. It must be written across his face. Maria pushes him aside and there's nothing he can do but follow her. Fiona is standing in the middle of the living room, clutching her small red bag. Her dress is crumpled; she looks like she's about to cry.

"It's not like that. It isn't," she says. Maria shouts her down, calls her every name there is to call a woman you hate.

"I felt sorry for him," Fiona says. She doesn't look at Carlos. "He's dying. And anyway, it was nothing. He loves you, his kids. He's just had too much going on."

"Dying?" Maria turns to her husband and slaps him hard across the face. "He's a two-faced liar."

Chris Weaver at Debden

After she's left, Fiona and Carlos sit next to each other on the sofa in silence.

"It's a mess, isn't it?" Fiona says at last.

Carlos nods. "I have ruined it all."

Fiona pats his arm. "I'm sorry," she says. "What are you going to do?"

Carlos rubs at his eyes. "I have to follow her," he says. "I have to go back to Brazil and see my boys. I wasn't thinking when I came to England. I was confused, and angry. I always try and protect Maria, but I've hurt her, haven't I?"

Fiona doesn't answer; there's nothing she can say.

"Are you really ill?" she asks.

He nods. "I haven't told her that either, or the boys. I think it's about time I went home and told the truth." He pauses. "I have hurt you too?" He turns to her.

Fiona shakes her head. "When you're home," she says. "Will you promise to write another song for me?"

Carlos nods.

“I’ll sing it with Soriano,” she says.

Guy Mead at Theydon Bois

It’s three months before he sends her the song. There are two parts, one for her and one for Soriano. It’s about seeing a girl on a train and not having the confidence to say hello. It’s about missed opportunities.

The first time they sing it together, they’re at Sylvia’s house. When they’re done, Soriano turns to Fiona.

“Have you told your parents?” she asks.

Fiona puts a hand on the curve of her stomach and shakes her head. “I’m going home at the weekend,” she says. “I don’t have to tell Carlos, but I can’t keep it from them for much longer, can I?”

Peter Starbuck at Epping

Across: 3. to search for (4)

This piece of writing mirrors the shape of the Central line, and brings together the myriad of stories and observations gleaned from my residency.

I am interested in how writing about and for a specific place or situation might affect the form in which I write, as well as the content. So I set myself a challenge: to create a story using the shape of the Central line. My story has 45 paragraphs (mirroring the 45 Central line managed stations) that each contain exactly 45 words and begin with the first letter of a station name.

Across: 3. to search for (4) is the result of that challenge. The piece follows the stories of three characters, Enam, Ken and Stephen and circles themes to which I kept returning during my residency, including chance, repetition, names and connections. You can read the paragraphs in any order you choose.

As the title suggests, the story is also a puzzle. Find the answer by exploring the story, or turn to page 80.

Sarah Butler

West Ruislip

Worrying isn't going to get him anywhere, but Stephen can't help remembering that man's face as he pummelled the train doors. Stephen shifts in his seat, and tries to unknot the tension behind his eyes. The dark's getting to him; he's been warned about that.

Ruislip Gardens

Research just frustrated Enam. I'm looking for my brother, he'd wanted to shout at the civil servants who shrugged their shoulders and said they couldn't help. Don't you understand? When his aunt died he turned her house upside-down, but she'd left nothing to help him.

South Ruislip

Standing amongst strangers, his hands balled into fists at his sides, Enam stares at the tracks and imagines what might have happened had the driver reopened the doors, had he stepped into the carriage, put his hand on his brother's shoulder and said his name.

Northholt

Never say never. Ken walks beneath a swirl of cherry blossom and imagines the scene – Helen in white, him in a sharp blue suit – confetti in their hair. He'll never know if he doesn't ask, but if he asks there will be no going back.

Greenford

Green helps keep you sane, Stephen's been told: it's calming. The times of the day when you're out in the open air with fields either side make up for the other times, underground, the tunnel stretching in front of you like a hollowed-out snake.

Perivale

Polystyrene cracks as Enam pushes the pen nib into the bottom of a discarded cup. *Kehinde. I saw you today and I couldn't reach you. Call me.* It's foolish, perhaps, to leave his mobile number in a public place, but what else can he do?

Hanger Lane

Hopeless, to shout at a stranger on a crowded train platform and expect him to stop. Hopeless, too, to beat fists against closed train doors, to beg someone, anyone, to change the way things have gone. No-one notices, Enam's discovered, when you cry in public.

Ealing Broadway

Enam called every family member he knew or could find in his aunt's address book. They declared ignorance, or offered vague, veiled apologies. At his aunt's funeral they all shook their heads and shrugged their shoulders and suggested that some stones were best left unturned.

West Acton

Work hard, Enam's told his own sons a hundred times; don't let yourself get distracted. But today he won't go to his office, because today he almost found Kehinde. Instead, he will travel across the multicoloured map of Underground lines, calling out his brother's name.

North Acton

Nothing ventured, nothing gained. Ken should have bought a diamond, but he's never liked them. Instead, the ring in his pocket – tucked into a tiny, perfect red box with a tiny, perfect red paper rose on its lid – holds a ruby in its gold clasp.

East Acton

Everyone thinks they are the most important person in the world, but none of them is. Stephen presses the two start buttons and the train slides back into the tunnel. He couldn't stop for everyone who runs towards closing doors, even if he wanted to.

White City

Wednesday 20th May 2009: Enam's 45th birthday. His brother's too. There's no point looking for him, his aunt said, but she didn't understand: Enam had been looking his whole life, without even knowing it. The only difference now is that he has a name: Kehinde.

Shepherd's Bush

Stupid, stupid, Enam tells himself, as he tapes another message to the tiled wall of an underground corridor. He is starting to realise, though, that leaving these notes for Kehinde will keep him together. They are proof, Enam sees, that he still believes in fate.

Holland Park

He's decided to leave it up to the gods. He will stand at the very end of the platform. When the next train pulls in he will raise his left hand, and if the driver waves back, then Ken will ask Helen to marry him.

Notting Hill Gate

No-one watches you when you're driving; it's just you and the train and the cycle of your thoughts. Stephen almost resents the man on Bank platform for catching his eye. There's something about him that reminds Stephen of the man earlier today, hammering the doors.

Queensway

Questions, questions. Enam's aunt had flapped her hand at him as though he was a fly she could shoo from the room. He spat the name Taiwo back at her. Why tell me now? he shouted, what am I supposed to do? Where is he?

Lancaster Gate

Lost property. Enam wants to fill in a form and take it to every lost property office he can find. Description: the other half of me. Last seen: never. Value: infinite. His wife's trying to understand, but he can sense the beginnings of her irritation.

Marble Arch

My real name is Kehinde, he'd told Helen on their first date. It means I was the second to be born, but I am also the eldest. You have a twin? she'd asked. He'd shrugged his shoulders and said yes, but he didn't know where.

Bond Street

Better late than never. Better safe than sorry. It's Stephen's Sweat Day. It feels darker in the tunnel, driving on his own. After today things will get easier: he won't jump like a scalded cat every time the radio goes; he won't worry so much.

Holborn

His aunt had called Enam to her, told him she had two weeks left, whatever the doctors might say, and that there was something he should know. She handed him back the name she'd stolen – Taiwo – and he didn't know what to do with it.

Chancery Lane

Chance. It couldn't possibly, logically, have been Kehinde, and yet Enam knows, inside of his bones, that it was. That the swirling chaos of London could have brought them together for that single moment seems like both a miracle and an inevitability. A lost opportunity.

St Paul's

Soon, soon. Ken hears the rumble of the train, sees the glow of headlights on the black curve of the tunnel. He raises his hand before the driver comes into view. Their eyes meet, and there's a hesitation before the man smiles and waves back.

Bank

Bank station appears as a slice of thick yellow light. It's the kind of light you feel you could run your fingers through, Stephen thinks, like silk, like soup. He sees a man at the far end of the platform raise his hand in greeting.

Bethnal Green

Before you were old enough to remember, Enam's aunt had said, a long time ago. There was no room, no money, for two, and enough trouble had been caused already. Taiwo means first born, she said. They chose him and he should count himself lucky.

Mile End

Mirror image: as he approaches the platform Enam catches sight of a man, taller and heavier than himself, but the same. He opens his mouth, but the word stops in his throat. Kehinde. Kehinde. Kehinde. You asked, and I said, yes, come, join me brother.

Leyton

Last night Ken chose a square of red paper, speckled with gold, to work his magic on. As a kid, he had won – and lost – friends by transforming ripped out pages from school exercise books into delicate necked swans, intricate roses, boxes made for secrets.

Leytonstone

Less than an hour until Stephen's meal break. Time does strange things on the Tube, he's been told. It stretches, contracts, slips away or sticks around. The man with his arm raised wears an air of desperation. It doesn't hurt, Stephen thinks, to be polite.

Wanstead

Where are you? Enam writes in black marker pen on the back of a Tube map. *Where are you, Kehinde, the other side of Taiwo? When I close my eyes and imagine you, I picture a thin red ribbon, curved like a smile. Call me.*

Redbridge

Right there, an arm's stretch away, but Enam's too slow, too dumbstruck to act fast enough. They say the world slows down in a crisis; it's a lie. It speeds up and away, and you are left, standing on a platform staring after a train.

Gants Hill

Gambling has always been frowned upon by Ken's parents. There's a shadow of a family friend, painfully addicted to risking his life on the throw of a dice, to surrendering control. Standing on Bank platform, Ken feels the guilty fizz of it in his veins.

Newbury Park

New at Newbury. Stephen wipes his palms across the knees of his new blue trousers, picks up his bag and the sandwiches Mara made for his lunch, and walks to the end of the platform. Six month's training, and today he is on his own.

Barkingside

Breaking his life in two with such a hard sharp crack, Enam knows it's not something he can mend, like he might a broken chair, or a leaking pipe. He has stood at this platform every day for fifteen years. He has missed his chance.

Fairlop

Fairness has nothing to do with it, Enam, his aunt had said. Don't shout like that. It was a difficult time. I did what I had to do. No, I don't know where Kehinde is. We agreed it would be easier for everyone this way.

Hainault

He had met Helen by accident: the pair of them standing outside a café waiting for people who both ended up calling to cancel. Can I buy you a coffee? Ken hadn't believed the words had escaped from his mouth, or that she'd said yes.

Grange Hill

Grand to say, perhaps, but driving a train is a powerful job. If Stephen had opened the doors for that man, for instance, he'd have changed his day, and the days of hundreds of other passengers too. Thirty seconds here and it shifts the world.

Chigwell

Cats make me sneeze. Cherries are my favourite fruit. I write with my left hand. Today is my 45th birthday, and yours. I should

be at work, but instead I am writing messages for you. Call me.
Enam attaches the message to the train window.

Roding Valley

Rain has blotted the pavements and turned the sky charcoal grey by the time Enam pulls himself away from the Tube. He walks back to his house, through familiar streets. Tomorrow, he will continue his search, he's decided, and the next day and the next.

Snaresbrook

She looked tired, but Enam refused to feel sorry for her. She had only told him because of a dream, because she wanted to set things straight before she died. He wasn't to get so upset. Taiwo? Kehinde?, he'd said. Another, lost half of himself.

South Woodford

Since Enam found out – it's been almost three years now – he has avoided mirrors and cameras; he hasn't wanted to see himself duplicated like that. He watches his sons, four years apart, and can't help but feel jealous of their easy friendship and guilt-free fights.

Woodford

Why would she say yes? Ken leaves the jewellers, and fingers the ring in the tiny paper box in his jacket pocket. He is twenty years older than her. He has lost too much already. He likes to sit with silence. Surely he bores her.

Buckhurst Hill

Break a leg. Mara had kissed Stephen, full on the lips, this morning. I'm proud of you, she'd told him, and he had tried to smile to hide his fear. The man on Bank station drops his arm and grins like he's won a prize.

Loughton

Left standing on the platform, Enam watches the tail of the train swallowed up by the curve of the tunnel, and curses the driver. There will not be another chance, he tells himself; he has to forget it ever happened and get himself to work.

Debden

Deep down, Enam knows he should stop all of this – leaving messages, scanning strangers' faces. When you've come to the end of the line you've got to be strong enough to stop. His aunt told him that once, but he can't stop himself from hoping.

Theydon Bois

Thank you, thank you. Ken smiles all the way home; turns a deaf ear to the worried voices at the edges of his mind. Will you be my wife, will you be my wife, he repeats over and over to the rhythm of the train.

Epping

Everyone thinks they are the most important person in the world, but a one minute delay will affect the whole line. Stephen's ready to go when he sees the man framed in the top left hand CCTV screen, thumping both fists against the closed doors.

Sarah Butler writes novels and short stories. Her fiction has been published in anthologies, journals and online. She runs UrbanWords, a consultancy which develops literature projects engaging with regeneration and urban renewal in the UK. www.sarahbutler.org.uk www.urbanwords.org.uk

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Solution for *Across: 3. to search for* (4) The initials of the main characters in each paragraph spell the word 'Seek' as you move from west to east along the Central line.

ART ON THE UNDERGROUND

“The Central line draws an invisible line across London – connecting east to west, rising up like the edges of a smile.”

Sarah Butler

Writer Sarah Butler is drawn to cities and public spaces where chance encounters and unexpected connections are a daily occurrence. Art on the Underground commissioned Sarah to develop a project for the Central line with London Underground staff, resulting in a collection of new stories.