

Saw this and thought of you

Tom Gatti introduces the winners of our competition for readers to write very short stories inspired by vintage postcards

In an age in which we are bombarded with digital information and messages, there is something thrilling about receiving a postcard. The combination of image – generic, beautiful or ever so slightly off-kilter – and text – funny or factual, perfunctory or profound, elegant or borderline illegible – never fails to excite. The knowledge that this humble piece of printed matter has gone on its own postal odyssey feels somehow more remarkable than the technology that puts the world in your pocket.

But if receiving one postcard is a joy, try getting more than 2,000. That's what happened after we launched a competition with Redstone Press for readers to write their own short stories inspired by real vintage postcards. The entries flooded in over the summer, and were whittled down by a team of readers from Redstone and *The Observer*. Last week, I sat down with the writers Julian Barnes, Jan Carson and Ardashir Vakil to judge the best of them. There were no criteria other than that the text needed to fit

onto a postcard (no more than 250 words). If you were in any doubt about how much you can achieve in 250 words, these entries presented an answer: a lot. There were confessions and accusations of infidelity, and relationships (amorous and familial) in various states of heat and cold. There were flights of fancy, poignant memorials, neat and witty conceits. There were gestures towards a time before instant messages ("If my mother is dead," one practical-minded note read, "can you get word to me before then as she is meant to

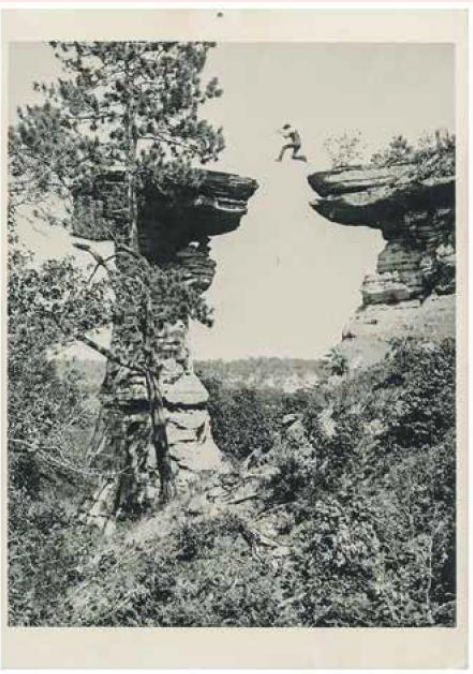
be collecting me from the airport") and a leap forward into the distant future. That postcard – a message between archivists, set 81 years after "Delta Event" – is one of our winners, printed here. All three, in very different ways, display a remarkable ability to fully realise their stories in just a few lines, and to breathe life into their narrators – a future person touched by nostalgia for a past they didn't know; a man reflecting on a moment from his past, frozen in time; "Mary" recalling a delicious piece of invented literary gossip

with just the right amount of detail to make it ring hilariously true. Congratulations to Liz Gwinnett, Jules Lane and Dieter Rogiers, who will each receive a prize of £300 and a place on an Arvon Foundation online masterclass. And thanks to all of you who entered. We hope it has served as a reminder of the enduring pleasures and possibilities of this small but mighty form. *Having a Wonderful Time: Postcards that Tell a Story is published by Redstone Press (£25); theredstoneshop.com*

The winners

By Dieter Rogiers

Father built a shutter fast enough to stop a bird's wings at the top of its stroke. Birds, however, did not take instruction. I did. The gap was five feet, give or take. Boys from the hotel cleared it for pennies. I had cleared it barefoot, carrying our dog. I had never done so over and over, for pa who kept saying: once more, Ash, the light has moved. The first plate fogged. The second he did not explain. On the third I landed badly and kept quiet about my ankle. On the fourth a wind rose up the gorge and he kept me on the far rock for thirty minutes, shouting I looked like a boy falling, not a man leaping. There was a fifth. A sixth. A seventh which he lost to a cloud, and an eighth, to a boy from the hotel walking into the frame. On the ninth he shouted my name, and I knew he had it. He sold that photograph ten thousand times. It hung in the parlour until he died. It hangs there still and I am in it, a bird stopped at the top of its stroke.



By Jules Lane

For the attention of Nona VI, Chief Archivist
Reference: 6582/61
Collection: 503/Pre-DE British South Coast
Title: Photographic card depicting "Broadstairs Beach, 1993" [DE-55]
Archivist: Tressa II
Archive Date: 30/12/DE+81

Exhibit found during excavation of the 33rd Quadrant, District B67. An elderly male stands near the shoreline, while children play in the background. Image lends weight to the theory of a population-level social structure supporting those too young or too old (or otherwise unable) to perform manual labour [cross-reference collections 8/"Family Unit" and 276/"Welfare System"]. A flimsy-looking structure appears to dispense a variety of garish produce [food?]. Note reference to consumption of "dogs",

contradicting the supposition that, pre-Delta Event, canines served as domestic companions, only becoming a staple part of the human food supply following the DE+9 Europa Famine [cross-reference collection 65/"Pets"]. Exhibit also supports the belief that, pre-DE, coastal zones were areas of relaxation and leisure. The sea looks non-phosphorescent and – though unconfirmed in this image – could allegedly be swum in prior to its toxification and the disruption of vital thermohaline currents [cross-reference collection 678: "Historic Maritime Activities"]. In the foreground, low, flat sand forms a traversable "beach"; presumably possible due to (i) subdued tidal patterns and (ii) far fewer severe meteorological events. The sky is photo-transparent and calm, further evidencing a lack of atmospheric extremes. N – We would have liked it here. Wish I could try candy floss with you. Tx



By Liz Gwinnett

Dear Barbara,

This is her, the woman Arthur still refers to as "that harlequin blanket woman". I found this postcard in a flea market yesterday while Arthur was visiting the cathedral. Arthur thinks it was produced to publicise her novel. Yes, that novel, the one people thought was based on us. How could it be? We weren't running a brothel under the guise of a seaside boarding house. I still find that suggestion distasteful. I don't think Arthur has ever got over it. He still has nightmares about the summer of 1973 when she stayed in room 12. I kept asking her not to smoke in bed, not to leave her knickers on the floor. We weren't used to women like her. Women usually came to Shoreham with husbands and large suitcases. She came alone, with attitude and a harlequin blanket. Six months later we saw her on TV talking about her bestselling novel. They said it steamed with sex and filthy late-night parties. I refused to read it and so did Arthur. She made him feel very uncomfortable, the way she said "lightly poached eggs" at breakfast, the way she pouted on TV and acted all flirtatious. And you know what Arthur is like. He thinks sex is only for horses. Finding this postcard brought it all back but I suppose, in a funny sort of way, she did us a favour in the end. We were fully booked every summer until we retired.

Your loving sister,
Mary