

The Word's the Thing

The Tales

Collection 6

Background

These are (fictional) stories told to an imaginary researcher. They capture fragments of the lives of each narrator. The 'tales' are being brought together as an imagined account of social research. In the meantime, a selection is offered here to Birmingham's activities to promote wider reading in the city and beyond.

The Man who might be Frozen's Tale

I'm saving up to be cryogenically frozen. I need to think it through a lot more yet, and put a lot more money on one side, but the intention is there.

I don't know how much it costs – but a lot more than I have in my account at the moment that's for sure, but even if money weren't the issue there would still be a whole set of logistical problems.

Do I want to freeze all of my body or just my brain? Does it matter so much if a cheaper option is to freeze the bit that defines me even if that future 'me' gets played out inside someone else's body? Would that worry me too much? And, if the only affordable option, were to freeze my sperm – that at least would provide the possibility of lots of future me's being conceived even though none will be me and none will grow up in the society I've grown up in.

As I said, sorting the money side doesn't answer all the questions. If I got together enough to freeze me, the real me, inside my own body (and still with the option of multiple future conception of other me's) when would I want to be unfrozen? Would I be able to say now, with any idea of how society might turn out, that I would want to be brought back to life fifty years from now, or a hundred?

The news broadcasts worry me as well. Suppose scientists got it all worked out so well that I was perfectly preserved and had chosen my ideal future time for re-entry into society, but global warming got in the way. What if fuel ran out and my deep freeze ended as a premature puddle of water and me-mush? Where would I be then (apart from obviously leaking out from the bottom of some once-cold store)? What would all my investment have bought me then?

Meanwhile, I've opened a special account. I plan to put as much as possible in it each month. It will be my 'live-forever' fund. I plan to go on the internet and find out as much as I can – all the pro's and con's, all the why's and wherefore's. In a year from today I'll make the decision. I'll either go for it with an absolute seriousness or I'll draw out all of my savings and take a fantastic holiday somewhere I've never been before. Either way the cash saved will take me out of myself and will introduce me to a new world. Whatever way it will be a springboard for a whole new me.

The Plasterer's Tale

'Your Friendly Plasterer.' That's what my van says and that's what I try to be. Friendly that is, not the plasterer bit. I don't try to be a plasterer. I simply am one and a good one at that. My dad was a plasterer before me. You'll find it can run in families like that, along with the emphysema that goes with years of breathing in fine dust and having it congealing in your lungs. No, I know I'm a plasterer. Every day and night my body reminds me of that. It's the 'friendly' bit I try hard at. Spread a bit of happiness with my roughcast; smooth on a bit of joy with my surface skims. It doesn't cost any extra. It makes me feel better and, I hope anyway, helps those I do the jobs for.

It's nothing complicated. I'm only a plasterer, after all, not some bloody philosopher. It's just a chat about football or the weather. Keep it simple; like me. It works though. You go into this house and you can feel all the years of gloom or sadness, so you chip away at it as you remove the old plaster. Maybe that's it – maybe all the bitterness and sadness gets soaked into the plaster over the years. It leaks back out to keep the atmosphere poisonous and suffocating. Bagging the old plaster and dumping it in the skip is like some kind of release for that room and the people in it. Putting on the new stuff is creating a fresh start, a new hope, a clear environment. You never know, there could be something in that. Hey, maybe I am a bloody philosopher after all. Maybe I should change the sign on my van: 'Your Friendly Philosophical Plasterer'?

You have to be prepared for anything in this job, and be able to react fast. There's the times when you're busy plastering away and the wife of the house appears in a bathrobe and starts fiddling with the belt and looking at you in a certain way. That's the time to make an instant decision – go for it there and then, on the floor amid the bits of dust and rubble or you look round for pictures of the kids and start a conversation about what nice looking kids they are (usually true), how you have two kids of your own (a lie) and what does her husband do for a job etc etc.... usually cools them down, all that.

Or there's the rare times you pull off a lump of plaster and behind it is a bricked up door or something. I once uncovered a recess in the brickwork and lying there wrapped in the remains of a lace cloth was a tiny skeleton. Shook me that one, I can tell you. Some poor unwanted newborn. Born dead (or at least you'd hope so). Using the work being done all that time ago as a convenient way of hiding it away. My work, a century later, uncovering it all. They're a bugger those. Police called in and everything held up until it's all checked out. Can cost a day's work. You have to pity the poor sod that was driven to put it there though don't you? It's hard to keep chirpy when that sort of thing happens. Usually, though, I try my best.

The Life-Recorder's Tale

I've decided to record my life. Not all of it obviously. I've missed the opportunity to capture the past thirty years but assuming an average lifespan (which I would expect to vastly exceed) I have another fifty years to go. To begin with I've settled on something ambitious but not stupid. I have set myself one year, in pictures, taken every seven hours of my waking time. It's quite a neat formula, I think.

I could have chosen something that needed less clockwatching. The same time each day, for example, but that would be 'Here's me at my computer at work at 11am Monday', followed by 'Here's me at my computer at work at 11am Tuesday', followed by ditto, Wednesday.....Thursday.....Friday'. What would be the point of that? Only weekends giving variety (and even then there's not that much variety.....'Here's me buying veg in the supermarket at 11am on Saturday; 'here's me peeling the same veg at 11am on Sunday').

Evenings might have been a bit better. 'Me watching TV 8pm Monday'; 'Me washing my hair – deliberately missing my favourite TV programme just to make it seem that I don't spend every evening crashed out in front of the TV'.....

It's better to have staggered time. Every seven hours. At first I thought of rigging up the timing system needed to photograph me every seven hours through the night but I really didn't like the idea of being watched asleep, even if it was my camcorder doing the watching and no one else was in the room. It just felt sort of weird. So – waking times only. That would give me something like: 7am Monday; 2pm Monday; 9pm Monday; the tricky bit – one hour before a sleep; sleep 10-7; therefore six hours needed from when I wake, i.e. takes me to 1pm Tuesday; then 8pm Tuesday; 12 noon Wednesday; 7pm Wednesday...no, it's still too symmetrical – just one hour earlier each day.

Maybe I'll try every five hours of waking time; 7am Monday; 12 noon Monday; 5pm Monday; 10pm Monday; (sleep 10-7); 7am Tuesday.....blast it, that's even worse! Four photos each day all at the same set of times.

Maybe every nine hours of waking time; 7am Monday; 4pm Monday; 6 hours to bedtime, sleep 10-7, 3 hours from 7am = 10am Tuesday; 7pm Tuesday, 3 hours to bedtime, sleep 10-7, six hours on from 7am = 1pm Wednesday; 10pm Wednesday (bedtime: sleep 10-7); now – do I take one at 7am or is that the same as 10pm without the sleep time – do I go on nine hours and take the next one at 4pm....even so that gets me back into the same sequence as from Monday anyways. I know – just forget the whole thing! Stupid idea really!!

The Bank Worker's Tale

It's handling all that money everyday that does it. That and dealing with the people who come into the bank.

The money loses value inside the bank. It becomes a different commodity, lying there bound together in the till drawers, stacked on shelves in the vault. It's just piles of paper, collections of currency. Each note is of no significance until peeled off and given a life of its own. It then goes from hand to hand, shop to shop, being broken down into change until somewhere in the chain a single coin becomes the most valuable thing you can have or not have – that last coin to buy a sandwich, that last coin to buy a newspaper, that final coin to let you into the public toilet or make the last minute phone call. Then it's back to the bank to stock up on notes for the next round of activities. People's lives looping in and out of the bank. Into the bank and out again into the real world. Making the bank unreal, not part of the real world, a world apart with its own rules and traditions. A closed society of people who come here to work and, because of the bank, take on a different personality before being released into themselves again at the end of the day.

The money loops in, out and back again. We, the bank staff, do the same but to a different time cycle. So it is with the customers coming and going each to their own rhythm. Some banking daily, some rarely seen. The bank as a node in a complex dance of people and money.

Each customer brings a bit of themselves in to present to us – fragmentary windows onto what their lives consist of. We see the fragments of the house purchase, the renovation, the car loan, the children's education, the business on the up/on the slide, the divorce costs, the death duties. Their lives pass through our ledgers and through our hands. We momentarily collide with another existence and, for most of the time, barely notice. Just occasionally we get jolted into their lives: 'But what am I to do? My wage hasn't come into my account and I've all the bills to pay and the landlord hassling me and my ex-husband, and.....' We don't ask for it. It just gets poured over us and sticks to us, staying in our minds throughout the day. It accumulates in bits throughout the shift to make up that day's unique pattern of emotions; to be washed off at the end of the shift. On very rare occasions there are traces that refuse to be dispersed, just as occasionally there is the final bit of money that refuses to balance no matter how we add all the figures up. We can't leave until we find that financial balance, but we are free to leave unbalanced by the trace emotions that accrete inside us inside us and become woven into ourselves. Over the years the money and the people rub off onto us we become part of them and they become part of us.

The Sudanese Woman's Tale

Here's a good place. Not like Sudan. I used to love my own country, even the sand that got into your ears when a certain wind blew from the south. When I was a child I knew nothing of worlds outside our small farm. I knew about chickens because that was my job: to watch over the chickens, spotting where they laid their eggs and knowing when one might be getting sick. That job I loved and did it well. It was the boundary of my world. Our small plot, together with my uncle's plot on one side and my grandfather's plot on the other. I spent every day there except Thursday when our family would go into the local market to trade some small things, and Sunday when we would sing hymns and pray at the church in the next village.

Life was content like that and I was happy enough except for not being able to go regularly to school. When the harvest was good there would be some small amount of extra grain to sell and we would have fees for me to go to school, but every year the money would not be there to complete the year and I would then have to just sit at home and weed or watch chickens.

That was before the war came to our region. Once we were swept up into that madness there was no more school for anyone. Boys never gathered in one place for fear of being taken kidnap and forced into the rebel army and made to do terrible things. At night there was no sleep. One of us always had to be awake on each plot in our area, ready to bang on pots and metal sheeting if any soldiers should come near. They never came but my life changed to being a person of the night and a sleeper of the day.

Even though it was important work, being a night-walker brought suspicion. The only people who, traditionally, really were allowed as night-walkers were witches, wizards and werewolves. To be classified with them in people's minds was a terrible curse on me. I would still go to market but there could be no more church, partly because I carried the name of night-walker but mostly because one of us had always to remain with the home, just in case of attack. Not that one of me with my large stick and my metal pans could have held away rebel soldiers with guns, but it was a thing of honour. The home must not be captured without resistance.

In the last days of the war the soldiers came, not to our homes but to the Thursday market. It was a good plan for them. They were in fast retreat into the hills and they swooped into our market on the way gathering up all the food into their pickups; capturing any young girls they wanted to take with them; shooting anyone who shouted harshly at them. My parents were proud people, so when the rebels took our spare crop and roughly handled my sister my parents rushed at the young boys. They died of course; as did my uncle, my aunt, my grandparents, my two cousins. I don't know if my sister is alive or not. She wasn't amongst the bodies I carried home to bury on our plot before I burnt the house, stuffed some chickens into a basket for my journey, and left that place forever. It no longer had good memories. It would always smell of blood and smoke.

It's been a long journey since that time and I miss the old ways. But they are gone now, maybe for all time. So here's a good place for me. Not like Sudan, even though I still love that country despite everything.

The Filer's Tale

Everything I have ever been sent, except junk mail, is now filed. My wardrobe is already part-full of shoe boxes. I find that each year's mail can be filed in sections, each section in date order, within one shoebox. Think about the maths of it: electricity bills=4; gas bills also 4; same for phone bills; water rates=1, if you pay a full year all at once; bank statements, monthly, =12; bank confirmation of the balance of my mortgage=1; and so on. The whole lot comes to barely a third of a box for official letters. Birthday cards and Christmas cards are handed to me, and there aren't too many of them, so don't count as 'sent' strictly speaking. I recycle them. Junk mail goes straight in the bin. That leaves most of the box for things categorised as 'other'. Other? Occasional letters from my sister down South. A letter from the Planning Department about changes to the road layout near where I live. A letter out of the blue from someone I used to know years ago. One letter asking if I wanted to join the Neighbourhood Watch [I had some problem categorising that one. It was 'unsolicited' so could really have been thought of as 'junk', but was from someone I knew – the old lady in the end house – and wasn't trying to get me to buy anything. The nearest kind of thing might have been 'Election Leaflet' but I regard them as junk just by their nature so I bin them automatically. This was something different, a community request, so I invented a whole new section 'Community Concerns' and filed it there.] One shoebox per year; six years to a row. Five rows up to now. Thirty years' worth of communications received. I've calculated that the wardrobe will hold everything in my lifetime, even if I live to ninety or something. It could then be sealed and left in some archive or other for another fifty years. My will could specify that. I can also leave some money for a fifty year party. A grand unlocking of the wardrobe and a release of those historical artefacts for people to study, building a complete picture of things in my life all those years before. In fact maybe I should specify a hundred years before the archive is opened, it sounds more significant and might draw a bigger crowd.

So, you see, it's a small price to pay. I can well afford a few hours each month categorising my past into a box if it all builds up into a unique route to future fame. I'll need to specify that the archive is named after me, keeping my name alive, a lasting trace of an otherwise straightforward existence. Just think, it will be a thread linking my daily life now with people a hundred years in the future. A legacy of sorts, in fact the only legacy I could leave. I've nothing else, so this would be an investment in my future, and an investment that I think it's worth making.

The Film-maker's Tale

Everyday is different, that's the fun of it. When I was working everyday had that monochrome feeling. The one that reminds you with each passing shot: This is how it is, and this is how it's always going to remain. Grainy black and white repetitiveness until one day you keel over at work and all your mates go home to tell their wives how much of a shock it was and how you were such a nice person. That was my past, my present and was stretched out to be my future until I changed all that.

I left work and went on a year long course. The thought of doing essays again terrified me. The language was new to everyone so I didn't feel too much of an idiot and, of course, I made up for all of this by my sheer technical brilliance. It wasn't difficult. In the factory I'd found a ways of taking myself out of the monotony by a dual technique of running films over and over in my head (sharpening them up until they became masterpieces) and – and this is what separates it from mere daydreaming – at the same time standing outside of myself, monitoring my work, watching to prevent any slip. At college I simply transferred these ready-made film scripts and my ability to monitor two or three things at once to my coursework and immediately blew everyone else away.

Within weeks I was the star. I was producing five minute films that were the visual equivalent of a haiku. Films that were soon circulating with samidatz speed, being discussed in pubs and coffee places. By the end of the first semester I had been on local TV for interviews, been written about in terms of the next best thing, and been offered commissions to do short lead-in promos for a film festival and for a new style TV commercial.

I was lucky. Young filmmakers were it that year, taking the stage from young artists ('so aren't filmmakers artists? – discuss'). My star rose, both dragging others in its slipstream and being boosted up by those behind me. At the same time I avoided the glitz, the clubbing, the heavy duty spending; the media affairs. I worked hard and got paid well. I stayed here in my home town. I can get to other places easily enough when I need to. There are times away on location but mostly it's sitting here thinking and planning, sketching out possibilities.

I spend what I need to and save what I can. My life is centred, you see. I have no need to prove myself through being a pillock – my art has always spoken for me. My work has been all I needed to prove who I was. And I still love it. The ability to get up, walk around and see the filmic potential in everyday life. No need for dragons or wizards or deep space – just the fantastic intricacies that go to make up the millions of interactions all around me each day, and this town is so full of little stories; every day throwing up new ideas.

The Mark-maker's Tale

I've had this insight. It's only recently occurred to me, really. My daughter's teacher was telling me that in reception class they focused on mark-making; on each child's confidence with a range of materials – pencil on paper, crayon on card and so on. Children getting a sense of themselves as writers, getting the letter shapes right or wrong, as mark makers – people able to (even having the right to) make their marks on the world. It made absolute sense about Jessica and her first attempts to record marks on paper as symbols of her inner thoughts and feelings. What I hadn't thought of was the extent to which it also applied to me as well.

It made me reflect on the marks I made on the world; the traces left behind as I closed the page of that day. It was amazing, once I had begun to take note, just how much or how little of me was left stamped on the rest of reality in any one period of time.

The image that came to mind, when I started to think about all of this, was that of the beach. The flat wave-washed tabula rasa of the beach, there for me to slide on, walk over, dig into, tiptoe across – all to leave my day's coming and going's to be cleansed away by the next tide. That was fine as a started image but didn't allow for any permanence.

Every day, as an adult, far from any real beach I could see myself leaving marks as I went about the business of simply getting by, but where were the lasting things, the things that would be tide-washed away? They were there in Jessica, of course. It was on her mind, her personality, her very soul that I left my indelible marks. It was in the shaping of her that I would leave my legacy to the world. How she turned out and what she did with her life (making her own marks on her own children as part of that) could all be down to my mark-making today. That's why I take it all very seriously.

At the start of each new day, new week, new month. I work out what I need to do to have the greatest impact, to leave the deepest marks. Everyday, every so often, I review where it's all taking us.

It's amazing that it has taken until Jessica reached school age before I saw all of this. Five years of her life have gone. Just think of how many more marks I could have made on her mind if I'd really started earlier. All that missed opportunity. Never mind. I'll just have to work twice as hard at it now that I've seen what it's all about.

The Ritual Rememberer's Tale

There is this place I go to. I visit this same spot at the same time, everyday. I've been there day after day after day, for more than ten years now. Ever since Once I start down that track my mind snaps shut, which is all part of the problem. I go there ritually to remember and, equally ritually, I go there to forget. Both at the same time. Dual action.

The same necessary ritual. Wearing the same ankle-swishing black cape. Carrying the same long walking stick, its length chosen to support my scrambling over rocks and scree to reach the appointed place. The here and now destination of every daily visit. Rooted to that spot as if, in timelapse slowness, the trees grow taller around me as I position myself, poise, pose, compose myself and wonder, but never wander, never stray, never deviate. Straight there, every day. Straight to the point; straight to that spot. To be rooted to the spot, exactly, for an hour.

I no longer need to check the time, no longer need to count out the last remaining seconds. I just know inside when it's time to leave, striding off down the bouldered slope to leave it all behind, walking back into some sort of normality.

Why do I go? Religiously, every day building on every previous day, systematically. Why? I've told you why. It's as simple as that. I go both dutifully to remember and to forget. To doubly take part in a ritual of silence and penance, of rehearsing and reviewing, of going over and over the same piece of my memories.

The mist swirls on days like today. I prefer that to the hot summer days when the cape feels hot and heavy even when I'm in shade, dappled by trees, standing in the circle of stones that mark out my tiny stage. These same stones have always been here. They were here even then, ten years ago, but I don't need them to mark out the spot for me. I know it only too well. The memory is as fixed to that precise place as my daily ritual is. The same place, over and over, pulling me back, pinning me down, rooting me there, day after day after.... Anyway the mist was swirling today. Wrapping its dampness onto my face; tracing its coldness into what's left of my hair; glistening its presence onto the outside of my cape. Never penetrating; never getting inside me. Nothing gets inside me. Nothing changes me. Nothing changes any of it, so I go there, day after day, and I will carry on going there until I have fully remembered and until I have fully forgotten.