

LIZZIE CANNON

---

L i m i n a l M a t t e r

In association with Greenwich Maritime  
Centre, University of Greenwich and  
Totally Thames 2017



Through an exhibition and series of events, 'Liminal Matter' is a platform for art making, research and dialogue within the context of maritime heritage, ecology and conservation. The artist addresses questions around human and non-human agency, temporal and spatial flows of matter and meaning, and an ontological fluidity that allows for an understanding of materiality as a reciprocal and generative relationship between humans and environment.

The exhibition explores the notion of 'Liminal Matter' in relation to the constantly shifting dynamic of the shore and its material. Working with objects washed up by the River Thames and the North Sea, Cannon creates subtle interventions which tap into their delicate transitory state. Her needle and thread mirrors the rhythmic action of the waves as she mimics the gradual accumulation of rust and organic matter by laboriously stitching together clusters of tiny beads. Alluding to processes of regeneration and acts of preservation, Cannon investigates the shifting territory between artefact and debris, functional and aesthetic, and cultural and biological.

Central to the exhibition is the major sculptural work 'In Transition' derived from an object washed up on Dunwich Beach, Suffolk, and identified as probable wreckage from a ship's funnel. The ebb and flow of the tide has begun to erode away at its identity, leaving an abstract structure with an opening longitudinally inviting access inside. Close scrutiny reveals the artist's interventions; the crumbling internal patina, created by decades under the sea, subtly mutating into a bejewelled crust as it is quietly colonized by bead embroidery. Embracing its continually changing nature, Cannon carries on working on the object throughout the exhibition, so that it is encountered in different states of existence.

Other works look at debris washed up on the shore to investigate the notion of friction as 'a generative sea in which people, processes and things collide, abrade, and affect each other, shaping and being shaped in the process'<sup>1</sup>. In 'Untitled 1-5' (2016-2017) Cannon uses the art of mimicry to subvert the haptic nature of what appears to be a series of pebbles. Made from silk and animal fleece, their soft, fleshy qualities disrupt the notion of minerals as static inanimate matter. The photographic series 'intra-actions' (2017) reference still-life compositions, whilst being reminiscent of flotsam and jetsam arranged by the retreating tide. Debris from the shore or every-day living are placed in combination with made objects which mimic or refer to them. The images draw attention to the way we read objects or materials in relation to one and another, undermining the idea of matter as a discrete entity and resonating with Karen Barad's notion of 'intra-actions'<sup>2</sup> to understand materiality as a momentary realisation of dynamic relationships.

---

1 Veronica Strang, "Fluid Consistencies. Material relationality in human engagements with water", *Archeological dialogues* 21 (2014): 5-6

2 Karen Barad, *Meeting the universe halfway : Quantum physics and the entanglement of matter and meaning*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007)

## All Change

### Caitlin DeSilvey

Over a decade ago I visited Iceland and spent a few days exploring with a friend. We drove west from Reykjavik, past straggling settlements and bleak, windblown expanses of landscape. Every few hours we would turn off the main road to follow a side road to the coast, where we would look out to sea and feel small, and then turn back to our rental car and the road west to the Snæfellsnes peninsula. On one of our coastal detours we came upon a beach full of German tourists who had just disgorged from a coach. From a distance, the scene was disorienting, as most of them seemed to be holding their cameras pointed down at the beach. As we approached we realised that they were framing and capturing images of rusted metal fragments that scattered across the shingle-- fractured, twisted sheets of oxidised steel. The metal debris was a vivid orange against the black stone of the beach. We later learned that there had been a shipwreck off this coast, and much of the ship's matter had washed up here on this coast, becoming fair game for those with a fetish for the aesthetics of decay.

Lizzie Cannon's *In Transition* brought my memory back to that remote beach, snagging on the recollection of both the particular textures and tones of salt-steeped steel and the obvious attraction to passers-by. But Cannon didn't pass by. When she encountered a corroded steel funnel on the foreshore at Dunwich, Suffolk, the National Trust had already categorised the artefact as a problem object (it had recently been used as a canvas for a lewd graffito). Sensing an opportunity, Cannon asked if she could take the funnel off their hands, and the Trust consented, assisting by hauling the funnel up to their yard on the cliff top. And so the funnel embarked on a third phase in its fluid existence (if the first was its functional incorporation into a ship, and the second was its internment on the ocean floor and its temporary offer of a niche benthic habitat).

In the studio, the funnel became a canvas of another sort altogether, as Cannon skilfully adhered an encrustation of seed beads to its pocked and peeling surface. The beads cluster unobtrusively, organically, mimicking the ochre shades of the rusted steel. They seem to be creeping across the surface, accreting like patches of lichen or a colony of obscure sessile micro-creatures. The cast off cases of other organisms--calcareous tube worms and barnacles--merge into the seeded margins. Depending on how long the funnel spent above the tide line, the inhabitants of these cases may have perished long ago or within Cannon's tenure as keeper of the object. It's difficult to be sure.

The installation of the piece in the gallery in Greenwich, surrounded by its artfully adapted kin, inaugurated a fourth phase of existence. In some sense, this transitional phase could have been the most static and the least charged with potential meaning. The funnel as artwork risked being stalled, its active life suspended, the currents of inhabitation and alteration that had swirled around it stilled. In the white box of the gallery, the funnel's material presence could have become merely symbolic, a cipher that gestured at the mutability of the nature-culture boundary, ready-mades and critical craft.

But the funnel was not finished with its changes. During the exhibition, Cannon continued to engage with the piece, to nurture the slow accretion of beads and to allow a slow drift of debris to accumulate around it. Her art-making resisted completion, and remained sympathetic to the object's vibrant after-lives, is continual transition into something other. In Transition slips the net cast by aesthetic orthodoxies--the tourists on the beach capturing their identical images--to inhabit a stranger and more unpredictable sensibility.

In Transition is not a stable object. Although the processes of oxidation and corrosion that transformed it have now slowed, they have not been completely arrested. The piece continues to transform incrementally, unobtrusively, shedding a fine rusty dust, and the occasional flake or fragment. Absent the moisture that had invaded its pores, it has become brittle, more likely to be fractured or split. In its fragility and vulnerability, the piece has something in common with other (partly or wholly) ephemeral and organic contemporary artworks, like Pierre Huyghe's ecosystems, or a perishable Joseph Beuys creation. Of course, this kind of transient art has its own peculiar and often perverse cachet, and place in contemporary art markets. What is interesting about In Transition is partly its ambiguous relation to this tradition.

The piece has now been sold, and will return to Suffolk to take up residence in a private home. What happens to it there remains to be seen. I find it appealing to imagine that someday in the future someone, not realising the value of the artwork and inclined to use its dedicated corner for a new piano or patio extension, may decide to evict this bulky and slightly bewildering object. Maybe they will open the door of their beachfront property and roll the funnel onto the dunes, then topple it over the edge onto the beach below. The tide will once again rise up and lap at the shell of steel, the seed beads will sprout strands of algae, and the barnacles and the tube worms will move back in.

1. [overleaf] View of exhibition 'Lizzie Cannon: Liminal Matter', Heritage Gallery, University of Greenwich  
[Left to right] *Corrosion (study with beads) 1* (2013), *Corrosion (study with beads) 2* (2014), *In Transition* (2015-17), *Corrosion (study with beads) 3* (2015)

2-5. [overleaf] Detail: *In Transition* (2015-17), found object, hand embroidery with beads and polyester thread,  
185 x 95 x 90 cm





















6. *Corrosion (study with beads) 1* (2013), found object, beads, embroidery, silk, 23 x 23 x 3 cm



7. Reverse side: *Corrosion (study with beads) 1* (2013), found object, beads, embroidery, silk, 23 x 23 x 3 cm





8. *Corrosion (study with beads) 2* (2014), found object, beads, hand embroidery, silk, 31 x 28 x 2 cm





9. *Corrosion (study with beads) 3* (2015), found object, beads, hand embroidery, silk, 60 X 10 X 2 cm

[overleaf]

10. *Untitled 1-7* (2016-17)

11. *Untitled 1* (2016), silk, wadding, merino wool, rusted steel wool, 9 x 6 x 3 cm

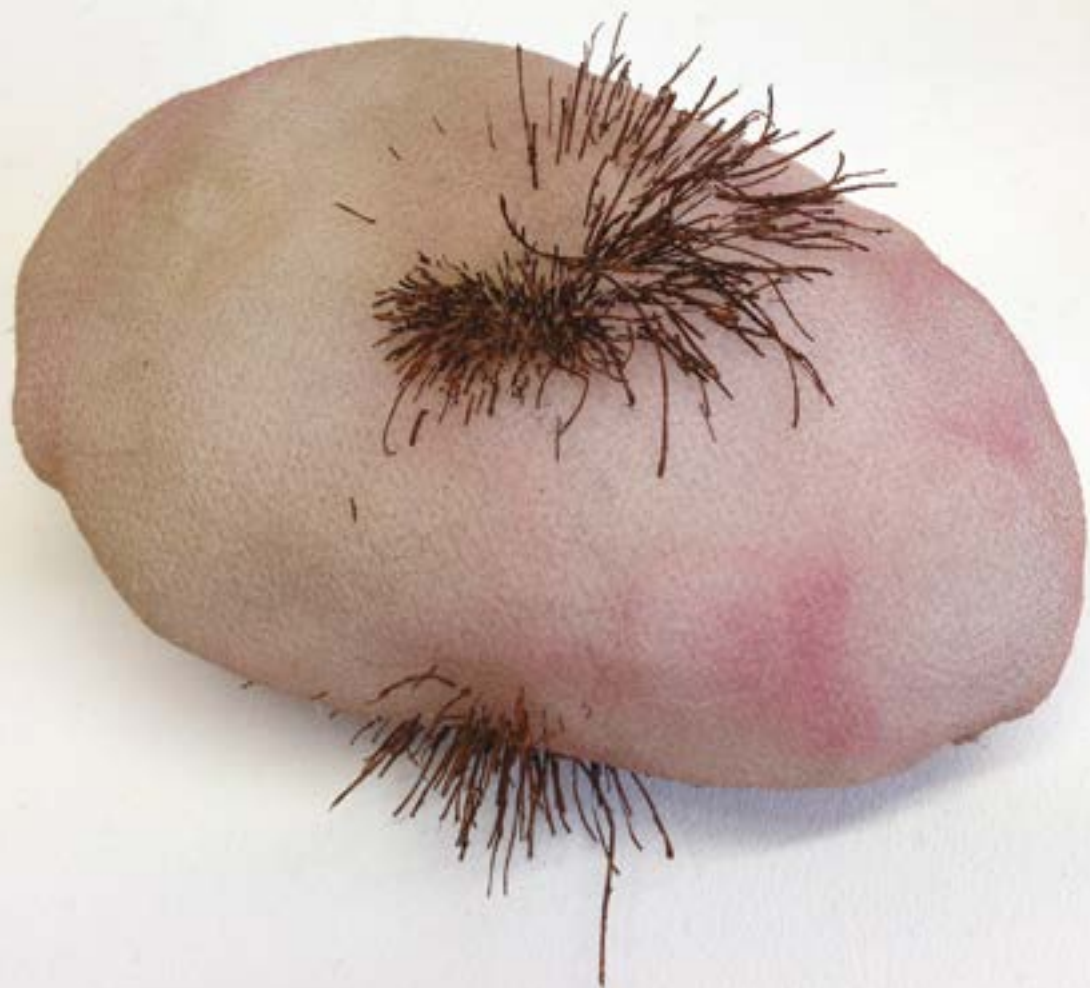
12. *Untitled 3* (2017), silk, tea, wadding, sheep wool, de-haired baby camel, merino wool, rusted steel wool, 7 x 4 x 3 cm

13. *Untitled 2* (2017), silk, wadding, merino wool, rusted steel wool, 6 x 4 x 2.5 cm

14. *Untitled 6* (2017), silk, wadding, merino wool, sheep wool, 6.5 x 5 x 3 cm

15. *Untitled 4* (2017), silk, wadding, merino wool, silk tops, 5 x 3 x 1.5 cm

















[overleaf]

17. *Intra-action 7* (2017), giclée print, ed. 1/3, mounted on dibond, 30 x 40 cm
18. *Intra-action 2* (2017), giclée print, ed. 1/3, mounted on dibond, 30 x 40 cm
19. *Intra-action 6* (2017), giclée print, ed. 1/3, mounted on dibond, 30 x 40 cm
20. *Intra-action 3* (2017), giclée print, ed. 1/3, mounted on dibond, 30 x 40 cm
21. *Intra-action 5* (2017), giclée print, ed. 1/3, mounted on dibond, 30 x 40 cm
22. *Intra-action 1* (2017), giclée print, ed. 1/3, mounted on dibond, 30 x 40 cm
23. *Intra-action 4* (2017), giclée print, ed. 1/3, mounted on dibond, 30 x 40 cm



















## Extracts from

---

### Researcher's Discussion Group

**A Conversation in response to the Exhibition 'Liminal Matter', between: Lizzie Cannon (Artist), Dr. Tim Acott (Principal Lecturer, Environmental Geography, University of Greenwich), Dr. Vanessa Taylor (Lecturer in Environmental History/ Research Fellow, University of Greenwich) and Dr. Adriana Ford (Research Fellow in Environmental Social Sciences, University of Greenwich)**

**Held 08.09.17 at the Heritage Gallery, University of Greenwich**

VT: I suppose what strikes me... as I have always been fascinated by the river and the foreshore and the stuff it throws up and as an historian I have done a lot of archival research about the river Thames and its environmental state and how it's been managed. And ideas like agency, and who is control of the Thames? Who does it belong to? And that can also be extended to the coastline as a liminal and difficult to govern space. And the way Historians work is very different from the way you work... it's a bit of a mystery to me why some people ..., like academic Historians for example, like to approach these spaces in one way, dig out the archives, and ask: What happened? Who did it? And where is the document to prove this? And what implications does this have for agency... and maybe there will be an object or material thing that is relevant, but maybe there won't. But with you... I can see you've got a whole body of theory you're engaging with there, but you're coming at this very differently. You've got this object and it just kind of splurges all these things up and you can actually do with them what you want... which is different from making a piece of art I suppose... you come up with some of the same ideas but in some ways its actually quite difficult to relate those realities to each other. An Historical article about the foreshore is utterly different from any of these things.

LC: In a way, it is a question about evidence... as an Historian you have to back up an argument with evidence but as an artist, maybe you are more throwing up questions and destabilising boundaries and questioning perceptions...

VT: But historians should be asking interesting questions, and often they are, but they tend often to go around the same question and there is scope there to ask different questions and find evidence for those different questions.



LC: Yes, and not always be guided by what is known before. I did a short project once with some Archaeologists. We were invited to go on a dig... as a group of artists and respond to the dig, it was part of someone's Ph.D. research... she was trying to see the difference in the ways Archaeologists and Artists work...I started picking up fragments of rock and drawing around them and making them into these weird creatures and one of the Archaeologists said to me, 'oh we do that', we pick up these things and try to make them into what they might have been. And it struck me that there is still a lot of room for the imagination or to construct things in a subjective way.

VT: Yes, that's true, completely true.

TA: Do you think as an Historian looking at this kind of exhibition, looking at the life of this ship funnel ['In Transition'] which presumably started off on whichever ship it was, the HMS whatever, and then it's been wrecked, does it cause you to think about your own subject in any kind of sensual way?

VT: Yes, I guess it is about the passage of time partly isn't it and I think Historians too will look at this very differently, [some] might think ... , mmm I wonder what funnel that is, what ship model it might be...I am not that interested in what ship it comes from but I think personally as an Historian I am likely to think about death and decay ... and one of the reasons I am an historian, personally, is I am kind of obsessed with the past and death and sort of wanting to recover what is dead somehow...

AF: It's interesting you say that when you look at those items because looking at them to me, because I come from an Ecology, Zoology background I think wildlife and conservation. And that's what I think it looks like, creatures that have colonised it... the new life that has started forming on an otherwise inanimate object, that doesn't interest me particularly... If I went out onto the beach, I'd be looking in the rock pools at the new life growing. That's what the beads make me think, oh there's new life you've created on there.

TA: So, coming from Human Geography... from a social historical ecological background, there are so many ways that this starts to begin threads of enquiry, ways of thinking, that it is difficult to encapsulate with any coherence... I start to look at objects like that and start to think what constitutes the ecosystem. So that came from the coast. You found it on the beach. There are things growing on it. It's starting to influence things in its surroundings. So, in that sense,

something wholly artificial, wholly human-made, ... like a wreck that's become part of a coral ..., it's become part of an ecosystem... And so that kind of ecosystemic idea then, if you start to think about ecosystem services, it starts to really challenge that. Because you are now starting to talk about this rusty old bit of an inside of a funnel from an ecosystem services point of you... It's not something you'd immediately think of as being part of ecosystem services because it's artificial. It starts to question human-nature, I think, when something is human when something is natural, and is there a boundary? And so that whole human-nature idea, in my view, begins to break down... And that starts to raise ideas, like Jane Bennett's *Vibrant Matter*, where she is going back to people like Deleuze and... also Bruno Latour's *Actor Network Theory*... and starting to think about *Vibrant Matter*, how that is having an effect. It is not just something inert, it's not just something that's sitting on the beach. It's actually having an effect, so in that sense talk about it acting out as an entity that is causing something to happen. And that becomes an interesting thing because that goes back to your question about where your connection with it starts and finishes, where it is an object, where it is nature, and so taking that acting out idea, you can start off with the fact it is an original ship, it's the lining of a funnel, it's been built in some sort of iron foundry somewhere. Do you know what sort of date it would be?

LC: A person who came to one of the events this week ... said between 1890 and 1930.

TA: So presumably in its original function at that point it was allowing or enabling that ship to operate... and then it's ended up on the beach and has become a vehicle for wildlife, for barnacles and things to grow in. It has started to become colonised, and so that distance to the human... is starting to get greater.

LC: But also, the history that comes before this starts to become apparent as well, before it was just matter that was in the ground that looks very much like what is now accumulating around the bottom I can imagine.

TA: Absolutely, yes, and take it one stage further than that, and how was that iron produced and how was it smelted, then this object is created and had a certain function, that was dissipated. And of course, the processes around that dissipation would be really interesting. What happened? How was the ship wrecked? What were the stories around that etc. and then it ends up on the beach. Is it part of the ecosystem, from when the barnacles started growing etc.? Who knows? Then you found it, you came along, and you took it out of that system and you started to put beads on it, you started photographing it and getting it into galleries, so it's now an object of circulation, an object of aesthetic enjoyment

etc. And it's been sold to someone who lives in Suffolk... so if you were to write a life history of that object, its having an effect.

AF: Absolutely ... and I was just thinking that object you found on the beach, how many people came across it before you, and did other people walk past it and what was their reaction to it? Did they think that is just horrible piece of pollution or did a child play in it? And it is quite interesting to think about landscapes now. and I am not an Historian, so I can think maybe a bit more about the present and how different objects can have a different effect. I think if I was a kid I'd want to investigate that. And obviously you've taken it away now, and so that's now removed from that environment... will other people look at the other objects in the same way? What constitutes ugly and pollution and litter and something inquisitive and playful to investigate?...

LC: Yes, interesting you should say about how people interacted with it on the beach, because when I found out the beach was looked after by the National Trust and I called them up to say, 'is there any way I could get this object?', they wanted to remove it from the beach. I think maybe partly because it wasn't seen as part of the ecosystem, and also because it had been vandalised a bit. Somebody had written a rude word on the back which I've managed to disguise.

TA: That's interesting in itself, that convention dictates that you feel you need to erase part of its history.

AF: And the fact that it attracted that history in the first place, for someone to want to graffiti on it...I almost wish you could know about those human interactions whilst it was on that beach...I'm almost more interested in that, than its role in the ship...

TA: In the Wetlands Life Project I am running we've just employed three artists...we're trying to explore what Art can bring to our understanding of Wetlands and mosquitoes and Ecosystem Services... Can they get people to think differently about things, do Artists come to things from slightly different perspectives? ...In some ways I think that's what you're doing with that object, you're challenging people to look at it in a different way... You've got this object that probably the vast majority of people would just look at and think, it's just waste, an eyesore, get rid of it. And I think it's worth going back to Jane Bennett's work because it's actually vibrant. You're asking us to imagine a different possibility. And I think you're doing this with these objects as well [pointing at 'Intra-actions' series], these everyday objects. I mean fingernails

for goodness sake! And you're asking us to think about objects in a different way, and that's all of Jane Bennett's argument. We live in a world where the ordinary and the everyday things, we look at them without enough thought or wonder about what they really are. These transitional things that go from one state to another and have this journey. And I think that's kind of what you're doing.

LC: Yes definitely, I think for me, well, I called it 'In Transition', I think it is about that point of change... but then some people who have come to the exhibition have seen it as more of an artefact. They've come straight to it and said 'what is it? Is it part of a ship?'...

TA: And that's partly because we see things as objects. We look at thing as objects and not as a process. If you look at that as a process you start to see all these other things that it is. I mean you get it from an object but it's when you start to contextualise it...

LC: which is where the interventions come in because I suppose I am applying a process to it in conjunction with its own processes. If it was just there without any interactions from me, then, it would still be a process but that probably wouldn't be as evident.

TA: So, I suppose an interesting aspect is why do you feel the need to put your beads on it, why not just stand it there as it is?

LC: It's a good question and it is such an instinctive thing for me it's difficult to answer, but it is, well like you said, it is like research isn't it... I think it's my way of trying to work out my relationship to these processes, where one thing begins, and one thing ends. Or getting my head around that there just aren't those solid boundaries, it's an ongoing thing and you can't really put a definition on it, bits are made by man, bits are made by nature...

TA: So, it's part of your process, you're trying to explore those particular boundaries and those particular transitions.

LC: Yes... and its down to detail, part of what I'm doing is looking really closely and a lot of what I am doing is mimicking and trying to be that thing, but at the same time I am adding my own interpretation because around the edge I have

purposefully made the beads more obvious, to stand out, they look more like creatures than they do rust and I've made the areas of beads look like they might continue to grow, so it's not just a copying process, I suppose I am constantly asking myself how much do I want it to look like something that is growing there itself and how much do I want it to look like the actual surface of the object. And how much do I want people to actually understand that these are actually beads? And what does that mean? Because beads have been historically used as currency haven't they, so they have value imbued in them already. So that is also really relevant... and the time element, partly, it's as I explained, reflecting that accumulation over time and thinking about the scale of time and about how things change on that scale...

TA: And do you feel the need to write this down and understand and find rational explanations for things or is it enough that you just do this and that's it, it just happens? But I can see you've got all this literature up there [pointing to reference books] ... so on the one hand you've got this artistic tendency and you talk about flexibility, but on the other hand you seem to be trying to make sense of it in quite a rational way.

VT: Is it 'Curated Decay'? [pointing to book: 'Curated Decay: Heritage Beyond Saving' by Caitlin DeSilvey] Is that part of what you are doing?

LC: Absolutely, I've read a lot by Caitlin DeSilvey, I haven't read the book yet, it's quite new, but ... what she writes about is the essence of it really. But yes, I do feel the need to analyse it, it's not enough for me just to do something and not analyse it, but that's partly art training as well, that's what you're trained to do, and to constantly question and reference to critical theory, and yes, I think to make something because it looks good is never enough....

AF: Yes, for me it is important that something is visually alluring...

TA: And do you think for some people that is enough? They just look at that as a beautiful object, it's just exquisite the needlework and texture. Is that enough?

LC: Yes, if that is enough for people I don't have a problem with that either, and I find myself when I've been explaining it to be people here, I find myself responding to how much people give me back...you kind of get a sense of on what level they are experiencing it, so I talk about it in a slightly different way as well. Yes, I think it's nice if it is accessible on many

different levels...

AF: I think it is interesting that from a distance you don't know there is any art been produced on top of it, then you might think, ok what is this? And you might go up to and suddenly see that's what you've done to it.

LC: That was intentional. I wanted it to evolve as you view it.

AF: You have to go really close up, just as you would if you found it on the beach. You see it from a distance and think, oh what's that big old rusty pipe over there, and you get closer and closer and stick your head in and see things growing on it, strange stuff and it's the same process that you've made, you can't see from a distance that there is anything interesting...

LC: But there is a thing about labour and time isn't there...the justification if something takes a long time...

TA: But also, an element of skill as well...because in this case, if the art is about your connection with this object its different the fact that you've done the beads and there is obviously an element of high craft skill that has gone into it as opposed to just daubing something inside or getting a bit of paint and just splattering paint on saying, 'oh I'm interacting with this, I am an artist, that is now artwork'. But the fact you've got the skill and craftsmanship in there, it kind of makes a difference, I think, in the way people engage with it and the conversations people have from it and the way that object is then effective in its relation with the Gallery and other people. Because you could do something that isn't skill based at all... you might want to get a day glow green paint and spray it on and show the juxtaposition between people and nature or whatever! That would be one way of exploring some of the ideas we've talked about.

LC: But then it would be very much about the impact of somebody on a thing, which I hope that this isn't, this is more integral than that, it makes you feel that those things [people and nature] are more integral.

TA: It does, it absolutely does actually. It makes you think of that connection and how you are very subtly engaging with this object.



LC: Yes, it is very subtle, almost not visible.

TA: So, what is your take on nature and society then?

LC: Well, this is something I have been exploring for so long, that division... well I kind of like to think there isn't a division, but then you can't completely break things down to that extent, but I've been reading a lot recently around New Materialism and the idea that matter is... it comes to be, that it is generated through interactions of things and processes rather than it being something given, that we are doing something to, and I think that very much fits into the relationship I see between people and... I like to say the rest of nature.

TA: It becomes difficult to use the language doesn't it?

LC: Exactly, I think language can be a problem, which is where art comes in a lot of the time, I think...yes, as soon as you start to use language, you start to separate things don't you, you start to create boundaries just by use of words.

VT: Can you say [again]... about New Materialism and things and processes, matter is generated through things and processes rather than just given and you said something about nature...

LC: ... This is where agency comes in isn't it, because some of those things are human lead and some of those things are happening outside of our control. But then they are always interacting and moving and affecting each other. And the idea is, they are connected to each other so one thing will affect another and that will create a new situation for other things to have an effect in, so it's a constantly shifting 'sea' [appropriately] of stuff. Those kind of ideas really connect with me in the way that I work, and the way that I understand those relationships between human activities and things that are non-human... but you know, you can never separate can you? You can never totally separate.

VT: One of the things I think about is the urban... Historians talk about the shift from the organic economy to the mineral economy when people stopped using timber to light their fires with and they started using coal and minerals, and it had a massive influence on the way we heated our houses. It had a massive influence on the climate, as we know. And so, this steamship is the product of the mineral economy, and presumably that bears some traces of the Engine Room that

was below, so it's kind of that ... sense that things are always part of a much bigger process and it's just tiny traces of those processes that are in there somehow. And of course, coal is nature but it's kind of a weird bi-product of nature... manufactured, well not even manufactured, extracted from the ground, but we see it as part of an industrial process.

LC: It comes down to time-scale I think because, well particularly with coal, you're taking it out of its time-scale in a way, it's accumulated over so many years, then it's burnt in a second.

VT: Exactly, all those millennia...

LC: Yes, and that's what makes it feel more human or more man-made, bringing it to human scale. There is an article that I read by Veronica Strang, about using water to understand all these relationships and she talks a lot about scale. And I think, thinking about it through water is really useful. You know, the fact that it is in our bodies, on a tiny micro-scale. And then you can think about it in whole ecosystems. But it's actually the same stuff, and those boundaries are permeable and that is a kind of analogy for thinking about matter in general and how things relate to each other.

VT: Water, in some ways is a bit like coal because ground water has accumulated over thousands of years and then you just pour it out of a tap and it's gone, or it becomes part of an industrial process.. there was one thing I wanted to say, ...Tim bought up the woman who said we'd lost the ability to see the imaginative landscape, I'm kind of suspicious of people who announce that we've lost things. Is it this book you've read that has lost it, you know, as long as somebody remembers it then it's still there. I think one of the things Jane Bennett is saying...is 'no! matter is not inert now, we haven't lost the enchantedness of matter, it's still full of enchantment.

TA: As an Historian that must be absolutely prevalent in your studies because you're searching for records that no one remembers...

TA: Do you think this has any bigger implications, talking about this relationship which in some ways challenges your own perception of nature and things decaying... Are there any kind of bigger picture implications? Or is it just it looks good in a gallery? Or it pays the bills or whatever?

LC: I think, I'm never a political Artist, I never create work with the direct intention to raise awareness of something or change people's minds about something. It's much more intuitive and much more subtle and questioning than that. But... you can't avoid the notion of responsibility can you, when you start discussing these things? And all those things we've talked about that this subject brings up, and it's there... and I don't know, it's something that I've kind of been thinking about. But also in terms of preservation... because I work in a Textile Collection... and there is that kind of Museum element of what we do there and the responsibility to preserve something for ever for people to see, so I think that question has come up a lot for me. And particularly reading Caitlin DeSilvey's texts. How much do you preserve the human aspect of something and how much do you preserve the biological history that comes with that?

TA: So, in other words, there is that ethical element?

LC: There is, but I think it's more throwing up those questions than me trying to set out with an agenda.

TA: But is it part of your own personal journey in terms of your own ethics, and just thinking about how you and the world relate... is that what lies behind your motivations?

LC: Maybe, subconsciously, I don't know. I think I am more motivated by the questions than the answers, possibly.

TA: I suppose in other words, what I am trying to get at is, does it make a difference. You do this stuff and ... well, so what? From your personal perspective?

LC: Will I then go and behave in a different way in everyday life?

TA: Exactly.

LC: Probably not!

TA: Maybe it's more subtle than that.

LC: Yes.

AF: Does it matter? Does everything have to be about changing us or improving? Or can it just be a fleeting moment of enjoyment or interest? It comes, it goes, and it has no permanent effect on anybody. Is that OK?

LC: But maybe for other people...maybe for some of the audiences it might affect them in more of an 'actually changing their everyday life' way.

AF: Perhaps more of an audience perspective, but for you, the time you must put into your work, there must be an element of enjoyment in your work, there must be something you get from that, even if it's not changing the world... lots of stuff I do I'm thinking how can we make things better but sometimes maybe its OK not to?

LC: Or maybe it's just that that's not my role with this? Because for some Artists it is. Their work is very political and that's the whole point of it. But for me, it's never really been like that, but then I don't whether I'm just standing back from responsibility?

TA: Because you have to... It's part of your personal discovery... You're thinking about how you interact with things and nature, so you are kind of exploring an element of that in this work. It's not like you're just totally distancing yourself from it, you're investing something personally into this.

LC: Yes absolutely.

TA: ...and that process of engagement which is interesting. I suppose I'm interested in how much you feel that is part of a spiritual discovery of these different things or not? But I think part of why I pushed that, is that I could see this being a jumping off point for looking at some other things like deep ecology and talking about interactions... the idea of everything being connected etc.

LC: Like Gaia theory.

TA: It could take you, or someone, in that direction. I could certainly see using this as a jumping off point. On the other hand you could treat it entirely as an aesthetic object and that's it. You know, you walk in, that is beautiful, and that is it, and you go. On the other hand, there is layers and layers that you can start to unpick that can take you into, what I think, are quite ethical areas, that think about human-nature dualisms and how we think about relationships into nature, ecosystems etc. I think you could if you wanted it to.

VT: Or that maybe is someone else's job.

TA: Maybe, yes.

LC: Yes, I am asking the questions in a way and that is unearthing or destabilising the norm and getting people to see from slightly different perspectives.

TA: So, say if someone wants to write a paper about this for instance, and about all the things we discussed, presumably you would find that quite interesting...

LC: Yes.

TA: ...because that would be like another kind of product, another effect of this thing, not just people enjoying it just for what it is.

LC: Yes, definitely... I think I would particularly enjoy it if that piece was then responded to by somebody else so that it keeps on...

TA: It keeps the conversation going.

LC: Yes, rather than it being, this is the message, and this is the end of the message... too tied down.

TA: Yes, it's a process. We are back to process again, all these things are in juxtaposition, ongoing, the ecological, the

social, the artistic, the narratives, and processes, they're all kind of getting mixed up and intermingling.

LC: Which is what knowledge is really isn't it?

VT: And one of the things we find in the University is... that we are expected to justify the impact of our academic work on the world outside academia and its assessed every 'x' number of years, what impact we've had, what social and economic impact, what's changed outside the world of academia. And it's extremely difficult for some disciplines to prove that. Historians find it more difficult than someone working on, for example, Demography issues.

LC: And who's to know it's not going to have an impact in years to come?

VT: You are given a chance to show the long term, like a period of 15 years.

LC: 15 years though?!

VT: It's the changing expectation of what intellectual work is supposed to do, it's not just intriguing or satisfying, it's supposed to change the world in some small monetizable way.

AF: Maybe I'm wrong, but in the past, I think Science, because its inquisitive, you could just do Science because you wanted to learn, whereas...

TA: I think that's why I went into University because I was inquisitive, whereas now...

AF: I think now because you're competing for funding and its public money you have to prove where it is going and what benefits it has and I can totally understand, but I think sometimes, there is some science which has to be for... just to discover...

LC: And sometimes you don't know. It's like with ecological resources isn't it? I can remember being taught in Geography at School about a particular rare periwinkle that ended up being useful to treat leukaemia but if it had gone extinct, I think



it was under threat... and if it had gone extinct before that was discovered then we'd never have known that was the case. It's a similar kind of thing in a way, isn't it? How can you always predict what is going to be useful?

TA: So, I guess then, what is the impact of this going to be in those kind of terms? Is value going to be measured in terms of how many people come and look at it?

LC: That's kind of what I've been doing for the Arts Council!

TA: I've got a feeling you've been counting footfall?... but going back to what we were saying earlier, in terms of impact on your own personal development or on what people take away from it, how do you begin to measure that?

AF: I have one more question, I am just curious really, if you are walking along the beach, what makes you choose one item to pick up over another? Obviously, these ones you've got here are metallic and look quite old and metallic and rusty. Is that the criteria and why did that become the criteria? Why was it not, I don't know, a plastic bottle that was falling apart that you sew blue beads into? I'm just curious about how you decide?

LC: I think partly its things are becoming more organic aesthetically, so rust is something that always appeals to me and things that are covered in moss or lichen.

AF: Something that is between the two, a man-made or inanimate object and now it's becoming a living thing?

LC: Yes, and then also just visually, I am always drawn to texture. My background in art is in textiles and texture is always something that grabs me. So yes, a plastic bottle, unless it's got really kind of bubbly or has barnacles on it...

VT: I guess if you had a very powerful microscope...there is a lot about plastic particles in water at the moment isn't there? And you could sort of isolate and show them. It would be interesting wouldn't it. But I think we'd be less likely to drink the water if we could see what was in it.

LC: I am really interested in plastics actually, and that is something I am thinking for the future. There is a plastics

collection in Bournemouth... but thinking about it from two perspectives, this ecological perspective, but also a conservation perspective because it's a nightmare to conserve. It's continually degrading and breaking down and, also lots of plastics were made to mimic natural materials. And horn is a plastic, chemically speaking, or structurally. It's actually classed as a plastic. So, there are all these things about it that are really interesting in terms of thinking about it as something that lasts for ever and is toxic and will never disappear, but at the same time, in terms of conservation, it is really problematic that it isn't lasting forever...

TA: If I've got your permission I'd definitely like to use images of 'In Transition' to take to the Ecosystems Services event...I think it would be really interesting to drop that into this Ecosystems Services discussion.

LC: Yes, brilliant, so this is becoming something that is actually having an everyday effect!

Published on the occasion of the exhibition and series of events 'Liminal Matter' held at the Heritage Gallery, University of Greenwich, in association with Greenwich Maritime Centre and as part of Totally Thames 2017 that runs from 1-30 September.

Kindly supported by Arts Council England National Lottery funding.

Photographs 1, 5 and 9 by Arnold Borgerth.

Cover hand printed by Make Mud Press.

© Lizzie Cannon



# River Yarns





With thanks to the participants for  
collaboratively telling these stories at:

'River Yarns: A Sewing Circle  
and Storytelling Event'

Heritage Gallery  
University of Greenwich  
1st September 2017

One day a little boy called Ralph was walking along the sea shore and all of a sudden, he found under his foot, which nearly tripped him over, a giant seed pod. He thought, 'what is this? It's huge, absolutely huge!' And he walked all the way round it. It was starting to grow under his eyes, towering in front of him and creating a shadow over him and making a really quite dark nook and cranny so he couldn't really see what was there. So, he reached out his hand to touch it, to see if he could figure out what it was and...

it squeaked, which he was fairly sure wasn't supposed to happen, it being a seed pod. Although he had noticed of late, that the Wisteria outside the window had started to open the latch by itself. This he thought, was probably a bit of evolutionary sculduddery to make Wisteria that much more successful, especially if you live in a rattling old house where the windows are broken anyway. But now he started to think maybe there was something going on in the plant world, if indeed, a seed pod is what he was looking at. He thought to himself, there is only one person I can ask about this, one wise, brilliant person, who is going to have all the answers to all the questions and is possibly going to save us from a giant plant invasion. And that person was...

the Lord Mayor of Tower Hamlets, which had, indeed, decided it was a city, because no plants grew there and it was really what was left of London. As for what Ralph had not realised, Kew Gardens had become the epicentre of the plant

invasion of the human world. Plants were now running most of Britain and sadly had banned the brewing of tea on the grounds that it was plant cruelty to dry and pour boiling water over plants. Humans were now only allowed to eat insects, such as locusts (because they hate plants). But like successive Governments over the years, the plants failed to take the long view. Encouraging as they were for humans to behave in a way that they thought was beneficial but was actually going to lead to the demise of not only the humans themselves, but also of the plants. That didn't mean, however, that they were prepared to back down. Oh no! For as they pointed out, fifty two percent of that Government of plants had said that insects must be the only food, even it was a way of shooting the Government in the head by doing so, thus meaning there was nothing to eat the predators of the plants themselves. As all gardeners know, you can get fed up with wasps, but then of course they eat the pests don't they? So, what happened was, that for some time the plants dominated, as has been described, growing and entangling, messing everything up, whilst the humans blindly believed what they said and carried on eating the locusts. After some time, however, it became apparent that...

the humans had eaten all the locusts and when they'd finished the locusts, they moved on to all of the other insects which included butterflies and bees, as they were the only things they were allowed to eat and they were starving hungry. And the plants were initially quite pleased about that because plants don't really like locusts

very much. They can't really see the point of locusts, they eat every plant they come across. But they hadn't actually drawn up the law very well and they'd forgotten to exclude all of the useful insects to them like bees and a whole lot of pollinating creatures which they had a symbiotic relationship with. And the humans munched their way through every insect they could lay their hands on, until it was too late and there was not a single insect left in the world. At which point, the plants began to realise they had made a terrible mistake and their lives were now going to be far more difficult. They'd have to persuade the humans to pollinate them all by hand and they'd have to pay them to do that with a special new sort of currency that they developed...

And the humans thought, 'yes, we must keep on doing this for the plants but it's so dreadfully boring.' So, they got the technicians on it and they made robot bees to pollinate the plants. And they thought, 'this is a fantastic idea' but what they didn't realise was that the plants then didn't actually have to pay the humans anymore. Their benefactors were the robots and so they were very much in favour of striking up an agreement with the robots. But how do you negotiate with a robot?...

So, the plants had to try and find out what the robots liked, what was their currency? The plants and the robots didn't really socialise that much, there was a bit of a power relationship between them. So, the plants decided to set up some spy plants to grow outside the robots' windows and

look into their houses and see what they did with their lives. And they discovered that what they really liked, was cheesecake. So...

the plants realised they knew absolutely nothing about cheesecake and they had no intention of going back to the humans. And it occurred to them, in actual fact, when they did a bit more research about cheesecake factories, that the robots were really proficient at making cheesecake themselves and they were themselves cut out of the equation because, of course, cheesecake must be dairy. So, they had even threatened to get rid of cows because, of course, cows eat grass and whilst nobody was really much of a fan of grass because grass was really boring, they couldn't get rid of it all together because there was the grass and marsh clause that had been signed in the first term of office of the current plant Government and they promised not to kill grass off. So, they were stuck with it. But they could definitely see there was a correlation between grass, extinct cows and the fast running out cheesecake. So, they secretly made an alternative, which was made from plants. And, not to get into the nuts and bolts of it, but unfortunately, all the robots started to malfunction due to a strange cobwebby substance that kept growing in their moving parts. And one crazy plant whose name was Hector, and he was a Hookerer, thought 'you know what, I've had enough of this. We don't need robots to pollinate us, and we don't need humans to do it, what we need, is to bring the insects back.' So...

there was nothing left to do with the robots.



Communicating with them was difficult anyway, they'd ended up resorting to passive aggressive e-mails and that hadn't got anyone anywhere. But where did they find insects? And this is where Tower Hamlets came in, as many of the high rises had kept a healthy population of cockroaches...

So, the plants thought they had a solution. Let's just raid the towers of Tower Hamlets, get those cockroaches, get them breeding and over time it will be alright won't it? Or so they thought. What they hadn't reckoned on, is not only did they have to negotiate again, and they hadn't been very good at negotiating in the past with the humans occupying the lower floors of the tower blocks, they had no idea what all the while the cockroaches in the higher floors of the tower blocks had organised...

They basically, had evolved into a super race of cockroaches. And they realised that they were in a very powerful position now, because actually, cockroaches can eat plants and they had been proliferating madly in the towers of Tower Hamlets until there was an army of plant eating cockroaches ready to strike at the very heart of the plant administration, which they then did with the help of a few traitorous humans who had grown to dislike the plants rule over the years. So, the army of cockroaches marched from Tower Hamlets to Westminster and overran all of the plant defences and consumed every, last, one, of the plant politicians.



I 'm actually a piece of wood but people see me on the beach and they don't really know what to do with me. Some people recoil as they think I am a bit of an animal or I'm part of an aeroplane or maybe I'm an old bit of bone that's been washed up or a piece of a shipwreck. But actually, I'm just a piece of wood and I've been floating around in this sea for many years now, back and forth, back and forth. I wasn't always this shape. I've become this shape because of the waves and all the things floating about in the ocean that have been an abrasive force on what was once my body. Not so long ago somebody picked me up and got really excited, thought 'I've found something really interesting, really interesting' and they took me home, took me off my beach, out of my sea, and they put me...

on their mantelpiece, where I sat drying out for a while, remembering long stories about how I got to be, and where I came from originally. Obviously, because I am a piece of wood, once upon a time I was part of a tree, and I was a bit of a lovely Oak tree and I grew in Sweden. And I grew lovely and straight in my huge Oak forest surrounded by my fellow Oaks, all of us growing tall and straight and strong. Which is why the boat builders loved us so much that they would order the wood cutters to come and cut us down, load us into carts, trundle us off to the coast and put us in ships to take us to England where we got made into boats. So that was the beginning part of my story. I was sawn up into pieces and people carved me, and lathed me, and sanded me, and screwed me with little wooden bolts into

other bits of wood and made me into a boat...

And now I am sitting on a mantle piece. Until the person who found me's nephew came along to visit him and he looked at this piece of wood and he said, 'ah, would you mind if I took that piece of wood because, as you know, I am an artist and I can see that I can create something beautiful from your piece of wood'. So, the piece of wood, found itself once more under the lathe and on the work bench, but this time it's being lovingly caressed by the workman's hands as he thought, 'what can I make from this beautiful piece of wood? Shall I embellish it with beads and jewels (like that famous Lizzie does!), or shall I just try and make something beautiful from the wood itself?'...

And he contemplated this for a while, looking at this beautiful piece of wood and thinking 'if I were a piece of wood, what would I want to be?' And then suddenly, in front of his eyes, the piece of wood started to change shape, very, very gradually. It became a bit more bulbous at one end and a bit more pointy at the other end, and the wood grain itself became more and more pronounced, and this strange sort of green liquid started to come out of its veins. And it was glowing, like it was iridescent, a bit like phosphorescence on the sea at night...

And the artist thought he'd never seen anything so extra-ordinarily beautiful in his life. So, he decided, once the amazing changes had stopped taking place, all he could really do, in good

conscience, was bury it. So, he took the beautiful glistening iridescent object, which had once been a lump of wood but was now starting to resemble something quite familiar and strange, and put it back into the ground...

And it lay in the ground getting stronger and stronger. And many, many years in the future, a woman was sitting very close to this buried wood and she could feel something coming from the earth, something very powerful and she felt the need to dig. And she dug up this piece of wood. And she was in London, but she felt a huge urge to travel. So she got into her car, took this wood, and she drove. And she drove and she drove, and she didn't sleep and she went in a boat over the ocean in her car. And she drove and she drove and she drove. Until one night, she found herself in the middle of a forest in Sweden...

So that's how I came to be back from where I came from in Sweden. And when I arrived there, I found not much had changed in the sense that I'd been returned to the woods whence I had come and although all the trees had been cut down, new ones had grown. And this woman who had picked me up and brought me back here, didn't really realise that the whole time she was doing that, I was completely aware of what was happening. But I had no say, and I couldn't say, 'no, no, actually I'm done with that, I don't need to go back, I'm OK, I'd actually really rather go back to the river where I was found. So, I ended up back in Sweden where she rather strangely and richly laid me on the forest floor, and did a sort

of a dance and started chanting and went on about returning me to my origins. But I was OK with that, I was OK about going back to my origins, because what that also meant, was all the insects and creatures that would normally have fed on me if I'd died there in the wood, were able to take refuge in my wooden body.



The jelly fish looks as though it's been bobbing around on the ocean for a long time. It was enjoying itself bobbing around on the ocean. Its got beautiful blue tentacles and beautiful blue colouring. One day, the waves pushed it out onto the sand and there it lay on the beach on a very pure spot of sand. And at first, it thought, how lovely to have the warm sun on it, but then it began to feel the sun wasn't quite so friendly as it was beginning to dry it out. And it thought 'I need to get out of the sun, what do I do?'...

So, it looked around the beach and it saw that there was this great big oil barrel that had been washed up and it thought, 'ah, that might provide a little bit of shade for me. But how do I get there?' It wasn't very far away, but it was quite far away for a jellyfish which doesn't have any legs. So, it sort of slithered a bit, and wobbled a bit, and it was a bit painful because it kept on getting stuck to the sand and it wasn't really very happy. And then a seagull came along and grabbed it from the top. And it shouted out, as loud as jelly fish can shout. And luckily, coming along right then, was a...

taxidermist, whose name was Rupert Chevalier. Rupert really did despise the sunshine himself and he picked up his taxidermy objects at night, amongst other things he liked to do at night. Really he was only out because he was desperate. His master collection which was famous throughout the underground network of taxidermists was missing one very significant item. And that was a seagull, with very particular markings. So, as he was wondering along despairing, because the sunshine really was quite horrible, he took off his hat to wipe his sweating brow and happened to glance above him because his eyes were caught by a glistening blue light and he saw his prize seagull but first he saw something very strange and jewel-like in the sea-gull's beak. And he thought to himself, well, if that's not my seagull I've been searching for high and low for several months, I don't know which is. So, he reached into his pocket and drew out his trusty...

pistol. However, what Chevalier did not realise was that the seagull hated him and had hated him for many, many years after a failed attempt to steel his ice cream on the seafront at Sidmouth. To this seagull, whose name was Simon, Chevalier was his Moby Dick. He was his great white whale and he would kill Chevalier today, or, eat the toasted jelly fish. He had a choice...

It had been ages since breakfast and although he was realising he couldn't just eat anything and everything whenever he wanted, it was starting to show. Never the less, that jelly fish was going to be past its best if he left it much longer,



given the sun was drying it out. And he thought, well either I have it now or I save it for later. But if I save it for later, its not going to be any good. And then I've got this pistol thing pointing at me, so really, maybe I should just have my last meal and eat the jellyfish. But while he was contemplating this, he remembered, that this chap was indeed a taxidermist, who presented some kind of a threat to him as an animal that could be taxidermed. So, he really didn't know what to do. So, he looked at the jellyfish, drying out, getting a bit crispy, a bit sort of toasted around the edges, and he thought, well frankly, it's now or never...

So, thinking quickly, he picked up the jellyfish, threw it in the face of the taxidermist. And the stinging tentacles of the jellyfish wrapped around the neck and face of the taxidermist who ran holloing into the sea to try and rid himself of this slightly dried out stingy jellyfish. And he manages to prize the jellyfish tentacles away from his face and neck. And the jelly fish was actually quite relieved about this, obviously, as it was, as everybody keeps saying, drying out in the sun and this was a chance for it to float back into the ocean and resume its pelagic life.



I was walking along the seashore in Margate, when I chanced upon a locked suitcase with a luggage label reading 'Destiny'. I opened it and found several aged toothbrushes. Uuugh, groce! This is really unromantic! I thought I'd open it and find money or something, or I'd find something romantic or something I could make art with, but all I've got is these disgusting toothbrushes. But hang on a second, maybe if I washed them so I could handle them without thinking I'm going to get dysentery, I could wash them, then maybe I could try to make some sort of sculpture. Maybe I could stand them on their ends in sand. Stand them upright on the beach like people and then take a really cool photo of them. And then I could sell them in the affordable art fair. That's what I thought. That's what I'm going to do. OK, great! So, that's what I did. And...

I realised that the toothbrushes were my destiny and basically, they were going to provide the subject matter of my art for the rest of my life. I was going to make prints of the toothbrushes, use them to flick paint at canvas, I was going to take photographs of them at different places and post them on Instagram and become a famous toothbrush artist...

And I decided I was going to dress them up in little clothes. I invited all my friends to come and we sat around the table sewing clothes for toothbrushes...

I was 'bristling' with enthusiasm until...

I got a very strange phone call which took the fun out of everything I'd done. It was my agent (as I was now famous) and he said, 'I've got someone here who wants to talk to you about your toothbrushes'. So, I went to an office and saw a lady standing there who didn't look best pleased with me. So, I said 'let's go somewhere quiet to chat about this. What can I do for you?' And she said, 'Well I'm a bit miffed about my toothbrushes.' I said, 'I think you'll find they are an original piece of artwork and they are my toothbrushes' and she said, 'I think you'll find they were in my suitcase and my name is Destiny.'

~~~~~

*Published in response to stories told collaboratively at 'River Yarns: A sewing circle and storytelling event', held in conjunction with the exhibition 'Liminal Matter', Heritage Gallery, University of Greenwich, 1st September 2017. 'Liminal Matter' was held in association with Greenwich Maritime Centre and as part of Totally Thames 2017 that ran from 1-30 September.*

*Kindly supported by Arts Council England National Lottery funding.*

© Lizzie Cannon

[www.lizziecannon.com](http://www.lizziecannon.com)



Supported using public funding by  
**ARTS COUNCIL  
ENGLAND**



**UNIVERSITY of  
GREENWICH**

Greenwich  
Maritime  
Centre

