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Crossing the Line: Considering the Dual Accessibility of the Verse Narrative for Reluctant Readers and Young People with Mental Health Problems

Edward Owen Davies

Abstract
As the child literacy crisis deepens, and young people's mental health collectively worsens, the barriers to reading I observed as a teenager growing up in the North East of England have only increased. Simultaneously, the verse narrative has been hailed as an accessible format in YA fiction. My article asks: accessible for who?

I identify barriers that both vulnerable readers and reluctant readers can face in accessing important issue-based verse narratives and discuss potential accommodations. These include considering reading age, lowering the risk of imitative suicide, and writing representation that follows the philosophy of "nothing about us without us". I also discuss the specific features of my own verse narrative project in terms of accessibility, including vocabulary, white space, and episodic poems. The poems discussed in the article are included as an appendix.

Historically, mental health problems and barriers to reading have been treated as disparate issues. My article brings them together to demonstrate that the verse narrative has unique potential to include both of these disadvantaged groups, in the hope that YA authors can use the form to intentionally reach a wider range of readers.

Keywords: *creative writing for young people*, *mental health*, *accessibility*, *verse novel*, *reluctant reader*

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GROWING UP IN the North East of England, I watched many of my peers struggle with reading. I remember helping at my secondary school's paired reading, working with 'reluctant readers' as old as thirteen who had reading ages as low as seven, difficult home lives, dyslexia and other learning difficulties, or English as a second language. I remember having to give these students *Biff, Chip and Kipper* books. It felt insulting. These were teenagers reading books written for very young children. At the same time, in my own reading, I was struggling as a 'proficient' but vulnerable reader to find Young Adult (YA) books that covered mental health in a safe and constructive way. The reading experiences in YA fiction could be intense, and often triggered my obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD). I desperately wished that authors would include content warnings, or that I could put my book down to breathe without losing my place, or that books would stop introducing my intrusive thoughts to new methods of suicide. I had mental health problems but could not read about mental health. My peers were teenagers but could not read about being teenagers.

In my own writing, I envisioned creating a truly accessible book that would address both of these barriers, with the explicit aim of enabling a wider range of young readers to enjoy a good, cathartic book. This article will explore the uniquely accessible features of the verse narrative that I adopted while writing my work-in-progress *Lost at Sea*. The full text of my poems under discussion here can be found in the appendix to this article. The project follows two teenagers, Morgan and Jake, coming to terms with their best friend Abby's death by suicide. The opening section begins with their learning of her death and ends about a week later with a memorial balloon release at Hartlepool Maritime Museum. In this article, I focus on the opening section of the narrative. In my discussion, I explore the critical and creative approaches I undertook in my goal of writing for both reluctant readers and vulnerable readers. I do so in the hope that other creative writing practitioners might gain insights from my experience.

Reluctant Readers and Young Adult Books

The term 'reluctant readers' is a useful shorthand for discussing young people who find reading mechanically difficult or struggle to find books that they can engage with. I use the term critically, acknowledging the many complex barriers reluctant readers face, and that the term can be somewhat reductive. Reluctant readers are a group of disenfranchised readers – or non-readers, as it may be – who have existed for decades.

There are a number of well-established approaches to engaging with reluctant readers. For instance, the dyslexia-friendly publisher Barrington Stoke uses both 'interest age' and 'reading age' to match children with books suited for both their life experience and reading ability. These specialist books are easy reading – but not necessarily an easy read in terms of subject matter. For example, Anthony McGowan's *Brock* (2013) features a violent badger-baiting scene, and the protagonist has a difficult home life. As I was preparing to write *Lost at Sea*, I thought back to my own reading as a young adult. I asked myself which books with emotionally complex subject matter had felt like 'easy reads' to me, and why? I recalled my vivid experience reading Sarah

Crossan's *One* (2015). I had flown through the entire book in one afternoon, empowered by its simple language and structure. Yet Crossan's verse narrative was harrowing, cathartic, and complex, because her stories use the 'easy-read' form of poetry to represent pressing issues like knife crime. The National Literacy Trust suggests that disadvantaged students 'consistently show higher engagement with poetry'[1] than non-disadvantaged students. Given the metaphorical strengths of poetry in addressing dark subject matter, the higher engagement rate for disadvantaged students, and the creative format that makes reading feel novel and expressive, it seemed possible that the verse narrative might be a natural vehicle for issue-based stories like mine.

However, I knew that writing a mental-health-focused verse narrative would likely bring *Lost at Sea* into upper YA, where more complex language had the potential to exclude reluctant readers. I felt this was antithetical to my aims. The narrative is set in the North East, a place with a 38% child-poverty rate,[2] and where 17% of adults have 'very poor literacy skills'.[3] I was writing about key issues in the region; I wanted to ensure that the people who would relate the most to my story could read it.

The National Literacy Trust identifies a significant cohort of struggling readers who can 'read accurately and fluently enough to access the primary curriculum but may struggle'[4] as the complexity of content and language increases in secondary school. I recognised this cohort from my own time at school, and felt that many people in the North East face this barrier. With reading for pleasure now at an all-time low,[5] and the education system struggling post-COVID, it seems increasingly likely that reluctant readers here – and across the country – may not even attempt the step-up from Middle Grade (MG) to YA.

For young people with additional barriers like dyslexia or English as a second language, simply using the verse narrative may not be enough to bridge this divide. My project would need more to truly reach disadvantaged and reluctant readers. This is where Barrington Stoke's approach became critical. Using 'reading age' and 'interest age' recognises the divide between life experience and reading ability and provides targeted support to overcome that divide. Informed by this research and my own experiences with readers in the North East, I decided to fix the 'reading age' of *Lost at Sea* at nine years old, whilst placing the interest age in upper YA. I hoped that this would enable a wide range of reluctant readers to access *Lost at Sea* and its issue-based narrative, whilst also developing their comprehension, creative appreciation, and confidence.

Considering the 'Accessible Features' of the Verse Narrative

The verse narrative is often reported as having a range of features that make the form particularly accessible to reluctant readers. Editor and middle-school librarian Maggie Bokelman suggests that the reasons for the verse narrative's accessibility include its 'generous amounts of white space, an economic use of language, dramatic storylines […] strong emotions, and an intimate narrative voice'.[6] However, the verse narrative is

not inherently more accessible than a standard YA novel. Poetic language can obscure meaning, and poetry carries archaic, curriculum-bound associations for many teenagers. Authors must actively ensure that they make good use of the features Bokelman has identified to make the verse narrative truly accessible. To this end, I identified key elements of style and technique to use in *Lost at Sea*, always bearing in mind my audience of both reluctant readers and vulnerable readers. These elements were vocabulary, imagery, pace, white space, and the use of episodic verse.

Style and Technique

When I mentored students in paired reading, we often found it frustrating that we had to break up the narrative with multiple dictionary breaks per page to understand complex vocabulary. Bokelman's praise of the verse narrative's 'economic' vocabulary seemed a perfect solution to this problem. In *Lost at Sea*, I ensured that uncommon or specialist polysyllabic words such as 'contagious', 'galleon', and 'projectile' come infrequently – at most, once per poem. I replaced a few harder words to make it easier to work out the meaning, such as changing 'hastily' to 'quickly' and 'sates' to 'fills'. This meant that rising tension would be less likely to be interrupted by dictionary breaks. I also exchanged cryptic openings like 'we went down, us three / to watch little boats' with lines that gave an immediate sense of location or purpose such as 'we sat on our rock on the hill / almost every day that summer'. By reducing the number of lines needed to understand the setting of each poem, I hoped that readers would have more space to think about Morgan and Jake's emotional states and the content of the story, instead of struggling to understand what was going on and where.

At the same time, I was learning from my observations of books for reluctant readers that they tend to include opportunities for growth and challenge for their readers. I allowed for this through including occasional slower-paced poems with more complex imagery, like '8. Soldier in the Sand':

> Thursday, we walk alone
> above the hollow cliffs.
> There's poppies on the railings,
> and a WW1 soldier sketched in the sand
> for Remembrance Day
>
> (Appendix, '8. Soldier in the Sand')[7]

This poem invites the reader to think about or discuss the ways that Remembrance Day and the soldier 'sketched in the sand' reflect the themes of memory and grief. As Morgan and Jake argue about the right way to remember Abby, 'the waves wash at the soldier […] leaving the ghost of his uniform / headless beneath the horizon'. The transience of the image mirrors Abby's life cut short, underpinning the tension of the scene. The slow, poetic imagery provides the opportunity to think deeply and process the heavy emotions Morgan and Jake are dealing with. Simultaneously, the white space

on the page – which I will discuss shortly – gives the reader valuable breathing space to prevent them from feeling overwhelmed. The dialogue gives a helpful recap of the story so far.

For a young person preparing for their GCSEs, this poem could also be a teachable example of a semantic field in action. Simultaneously, a young person living by the coast would recognise the artistic and communal value of sand art, and find their own experiences reflected in a work of fiction. In these ways, slower poems are essential to the aims of works like *Lost at Sea*. They give the reader a chance to reflect, whilst building the reluctant reader's confidence in both reading analysis and comprehension. These benefits make poems like '8. Soldier in the Sand' worth including – but, like vocabulary, they must be carefully balanced and infrequent, to ensure that reluctant readers have plenty of opportunity to simply get lost in the story and enjoy themselves.

Another accessible feature of the verse narrative that Bokelman highlights is 'white space'. White space helps pages look less intimidating by adding breathing space. It also provides opportunities to make the poem more visually interesting through fun or interesting shapes. The most consistent white space in any novel comes at the end of a chapter or page. To increase the amount of this type of white space in the novel, thus making the book more manageable for reluctant readers, I decided to mimic Crossan's style of 1–3 pages per poem. Each poem encapsulates one moment, scene, or image, with a clear break before the next one. Tia Fisher, author of *Crossing the Line* (2023), calls this style 'episodic'.[8]

There were several reasons to use an episodic style, including the benefits of white space. By using episodic poems, I was hoping to avoid the pitfalls that Fisher identifies in Manjeet Mann's *The Crossing* (2021),[9] where the dual continuous narrators can become confused and have to be distinguished by the use of a serif and non-serif font – which could become problematic for dyslexic readers.[10] I knew early on that *Lost at Sea* needed two protagonists with their own unique struggles. This way, I could help a wider range of readers relate to the specific struggles of at least one protagonist. Giving these perspectives equal weight whilst following dyslexia-friendly style rules almost necessitated an alternating episodic style, similar to Sarah Crossan and Brian Conaghan's *We Fall Apart* (2017).

However, I could not follow their form exactly, because those authors set apart Nicu's voice through using non-standard grammar and spelling, which could make it harder for a reluctant reader to understand his perspective. This type of differentiation would not work for *Lost at Sea*, with my explicit goal of inclusion. Even with episodic poems, differentiating the two narrators was still a pressing challenge. White space then became a key tool in differentiating my dual protagonists.

Morgan lies on my floor,
my clothes and clutter arcing
at the ends of her hair.
Sometimes, I hear a pencil.
Maybe she's doodling.

(Appendix, Jake's perspective in '6. Arts and Stars')

I decided that sections from Jake's perspective would use measured and consistent white space. I gave him a more reflective voice, using detailed description and a range of vocabulary, more evenly formatted verses, and shorter sentences. This reflects the fact that he is keeping his grief at arm's length. His grief is quiet and mediative, leading to short, pithy phrases like 'we'll never know what / she would have been', and 'it was pretty cool how much she knew' after lengthy reflections. He has neatly compartmentalised poems with artsy titles like '4. Once Upon a Maritime', or '6. Arts and Stars'.

In contrast, Morgan's poems are messy and raw. Her words travel across the page.

I'm not here on my family holidays
able to do whatever I want

because it's November and
if I was on my holidays

she'd be here.

(Appendix, Morgan's perspective in '5. Where the HELL is the bus?')

Morgan makes full use of the verse narrative's potential for white space, making her intense grief visible. Her frustration and confusion are reflected in her poem titles, which are dialogic questions like '1. What are you talking about?' and '5. Where the HELL is the bus?'. This contrasts with Jake's smooth titles and measured white space.

Morgan's imagery is also less metaphorical than Jake's. For instance, comparing Morgan's 'big ropes and fishy smells' to Jake's 'watery tidal advance'. These differences reflect their distinct personalities, making them easier to tell apart on the page, whilst reflecting two different types of grief.

These changes to character voice and white space were a strong start for ensuring that the episodic style was effective for reluctant readers. However, I still worried that readers might find the dual narrators challenging or distracting, particularly in the early pages where the characters are unfamiliar and the white space patterns are less established. This led me to numbering the poems, giving Morgan odd numbers and Jake even, in a consistent back-and-forth rhythm. This gives the reluctant reader an easy shorthand to remember whose first-person thoughts they are reading if

they need it – but the numbers could be skimmed over by a more confident or familiar reader, preserving the pace of the narrative.

I hope these episodic poems enable *Lost at Sea* to achieve my aim of reaching reluctant readers and delivering an accessible story. However, this style is not suited to all verse narratives or all audiences. Fisher suggests that titles in the episodic style can be a 'barrier' to 'narrative flow'.[11] They can break the reader's immersion in the story. This means the episodic style could in fact deter reluctant readers, despite the benefits of the increased white space. However, for *Lost at Sea*, this drawback was minimal. In fact, breaking up the narrative flow could actually be beneficial for my second target readership: vulnerable readers.

Protecting Vulnerable Readers

In the introduction, I shared that reading YA books as a teenager could be very difficult for me because of my OCD. Heightened emotions, dramatised depictions, and fast-paced narratives focusing on the darkest parts of teen mental health triggered intense, repetitive intrusive thoughts. This, in effect, meant I could not read mainstream stories about mental health. I was frustrated that popular books were not designed to be read by their own protagonists. It was important to me that, in writing *Lost at Sea*, I provided accommodations not only for reluctant readers, but also for readers like me, who might be confident in their reading habits, but vulnerable in their lived experience.

In this article, 'vulnerable readers' refers to young people with mental health problems, like I was, but it is important to note that any issue-based narrative will affect some young people more than others. For other books, a vulnerable reader might be a teenager affected by substance abuse, racism, disability, the foster-care system, or any number of other complex experiences that authors and readers find compelling. I find the principle of 'nothing about us without us', often invoked by the disability justice movement, to be a useful guide for writing issue-based books, like *Lost at Sea*.[12] It informs the writing process by not only consulting with affected groups for accuracy, but also by considering the reading experience of people in those groups.

The episodic verse narrative might have been a valuable accommodation for me; it would have directly changed my reading experience by giving me opportunities to pace myself. The breaks in 'narrative flow' that Fisher discusses enable the reader to put a book down without losing their place. This could help vulnerable readers process difficult scenes, regulate their emotions, and avoid triggering panic attacks or suicidal thoughts. This ultimately makes the book more accessible and encourages readers to prioritise their health. This seemed like a worthwhile trade-off for the slight disruption to narrative flow for reluctant readers.

I felt these accommodations were especially important for *Lost at Sea*, because teenagers with mental health problems deserve to read good stories about mental health. Literary agent and editor Mary Kole agrees. She suggests that, for some

teenagers, fiction is a 'safe way' to explore 'the dark underbelly of life'[13] that they start to encounter during secondary school.

A book like *Lost at Sea* can be a cathartic and useful insight into grief and mental health. In writing *Lost at* Sea, I wanted to represent those facing these issues, and ensure that they have a 'safe way' to explore the dark underbelly of their own lives. Given that 50% of mental health conditions appear before age 14, it felt essential to have one main character develop a diagnosable condition in response to Abby's death.[14] Morgan's emerging OCD shows the difference between having mental health struggles and a mental health condition. In these opening pages, Morgan's obsessions – the 'thoughts, feelings, images, urges, worries or doubts that keep coming into [her] mind'[15] – are triggered by real objects, for instance 'the ropes fill my head with nooses'. They might initially go unnoticed by the reader, paralleling the way the real condition often begins. Yet Morgan's simplistic imagery, which we discussed earlier, means that when her intrusive thoughts do strike, there is less potential confusion about them being metaphorical because they seem out of place. I drew some influence here from Holly Bourne's *Am I Normal Yet?* (2015), which gives OCD its own font, paragraphs, and style, but I still needed to follow my established dyslexia-friendly font rules in order to satisfy the needs of reluctant readers. The unique form of the verse narrative was my solution.

Her permanent name
The compass
Slips
Into my arm.
Scratching her name.

(Appendix, '7. What is P?')

In this poem, when 'the compass / slips' into Morgan's arm, the word 'slips' shifts towards the margin, out of the regular stanza pattern that the poem has established. This disruption differentiates it, but it also serves the poem thematically by mimicking the sliding motion of self-harm, and by visually disrupting Morgan's thoughts. It is brief enough that a vulnerable reader can, I hope, take a breath at the end of the page and safeguard themselves.

However, this on its own may not be enough to protect vulnerable readers. I decided to accommodate vulnerable readers through early signposting that decreases risk and therefore increases accessibility. Whilst I loved *Am I Normal Yet?*, it could have been a dangerous book to read if I had contamination-based OCD, particularly because of protagonist Evie's climactic self-destructive breakdown. Similarly, someone with Morgan's exact symptoms might find reading *Lost at Sea* uniquely difficult. This is why her symptoms appear early, to help vulnerable readers who are too similar to Morgan realise that they need a different book, before they get attached. This was one reason I chose to open *Lost at Sea* with Morgan and Jake learning of Abby's death by suicide.

The mental health content is clearly indicated on page 3, enabling vulnerable readers and their gatekeepers to make informed decisions about what is safe for them to read.

This signposting allows the plot to carry the same level of drama of any other YA book whilst mitigating risk. Kole suggests that teenagers 'want to read about events and days that are *life-changing*'.[16] For YA authors, a suicide attempt might be a tempting plot point, but these depictions can put vulnerable readers at risk of imitative suicide if handled poorly. Janette Taylor suggests that the risk is 'greater when more detail is included'[17] in suicide scenes.

Whilst I could have written a more cinematic first poem, detailing Abby's thoughts and the beautiful seascape before her death, I wanted to avoid romanticising it through poetic language or providing means for imitative suicide through detail. Instead, her death is only described by others. Miss Eyre, who breaks the news, simply says 'Abby's body was found on the rocks / they think it was / suicide', then the poem ends. This emphasises the finality of suicide. The uncertain method might invite curiosity in the reader, but this mirrors the confused emotional state of the characters, and means that the risk of imitative suicide is reduced. The limited detail works as an accommodation for vulnerable readers and also serves the internal themes of the narrative.

Indeed, Jake feels uncertain about Abby's death, describing it speculatively. He sees a pebble falling down 'the cliffs / the rocks / to the sea where Abby might've died'. Again, the rocks are emphasised, rather than Abby herself. This pulls the focus to her painful absence, rather than the in-the-moment thought process and circumstances of her death. Comparing this with other suicides from YA fiction during 2010s, like the shockingly graphic suicide of Luke in Will Hill's *After the Fire* (2018), the infamous bathtub scene in Netflix's *13 Reasons Why* (2017) series, an adaptation of Jay Asher's 2007 YA novel of the same name,[18] or Finch's drowning in Jennifer Niven's *All the Bright Places* (2014), Abby's death seems a quiet tragedy, not a sensational event. It is not distinctive. The simple, non-novel method of falling from a height or drowning reduces the risk of imitative suicide, whilst preserving the impact of the event.

The second reason for beginning with Abby's death was also to reduce the likelihood of a teenager struggling with mental health placing themselves in Abby's shoes. To write strong characters, Taylor suggests that 'authors try really hard to draw the reader close to their character's thoughts and feelings'.[19] This can then increase danger by placing struggling teenagers into the position of a suicidal character before their death. By opening with Abby's death and writing through the perspectives of Jake and Morgan, I tried to negate this risk. Abby is a full character, a favourite student who likes the Spanish Armada and pretty highlighters, but her mental health struggles and death happen before the story begins. Instead, we focus on her surviving friends, who must find a way to live without her. By building the narrative arc away from suicide in this way, using two different protagonists, *Lost at Sea* aims to help teenagers with mental health struggles process the absences they might face in a safe and constructive way, without putting them at risk of imitative suicide.

Conclusion

YA books thrive on issue-based narratives that bring drama, real world problems, and expressive language to their readers. However, these stories, often written about the most disadvantaged young people, can exclude both vulnerable readers and reluctant readers. In some cases, there may be significant overlap in these audiences' needs; disadvantaged teenagers who find reading difficult are perhaps more likely to struggle with mental health problems than their peers; teenagers with mental health issues may find their focus or time are too limited for sustained reading. Reading difficulties and mental health problems can sometimes be worsened by the same circumstances, like interrupted education, difficult home lives, and unidentified special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) needs. These readers deserve the chance to read their own stories.

I attempt to make this possible with my verse novel *Lost at Sea*, offering these practice-based insights to writers working in the same space. By writing away from suicide and carefully considering the impact of portrayals of mental health, we can allow vulnerable readers to process their experiences in a safe environment. In addition, by using features like simple evocative language and white space, and carefully considering reading ability, we can include reluctant readers in the conversations that issue-based novels provoke. Whilst no approach to accessibility can include everyone, I have argued that the verse narrative is emerging as the most accessible format in YA for a reason. With continued intentional use, it has the potential to address this dual issue of accessibility and accommodation. By considering the intersection of these issues, narratives like *Lost at Sea* will hopefully become an example of the ways that the accessible verse narrative can allow both vulnerable readers and reluctant readers to fully enjoy a good, cathartic book.

Notes

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7. I quote from my own work in this article. The full text of selected poems from *Lost at Sea* can be found in the article appendix.

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Edward Davies, hailing from Sunderland, recently graduated with a BA in English Literature with Creative Writing from Lancaster University. He is an emerging place-based poet, reading at grassroots events like King Ink and Queer By Gum's Variety Night. Edward currently works in the public library sector and as a creative workshop facilitator for teenagers. He has a keen interest in the barriers young people face to arts participation. As a still-young writer, he knows those barriers well and can't wait to break them down.

Appendix
5. Where the HELL is the bus?

My breath winds like mist
light grey over evergreen
sharp tipped leaves
whilst I walk in the middle
of a stupidly small hedge maze.

With each breath my feelings leave
like they would with the exhale
of a cigarette.

I skipped smoking with

the girls today and skipped
gave Jake the slip

ran away in some ornate garden
the kind that happy families take daytrips to.
I think of hidden rings of smooth pebbles
water trickling over witchy moss
till it drowns out

dampening out the world

but the maze walls are too thick and I know
with each rising breath
the teachers
will come looking and

I'm not here on my family holidays
able to do whatever I want

because it's November and
if I was on my holidays

she'd be here.

Clever clogs Abby could
always find her way
always read a map
always get us out of anything
but even this tiny maze is too big
for me and I have
no idea where I am and I

I need to **get out**

and I tear at the leaves and scratch
twigs between my fingers
like bracken

it stings

it stings

but I'm
still here

and
I climb through the leaves till

blood pours from my
hands

sticks in my
hair

and

I go back to the bus like nothing happened.

6. Arts and Stars

Morgan lies on my floor,
my clothes and clutter arcing
at the ends of her hair.

Sometimes, I hear a pencil.
Maybe she's doodling.

Pop-up stars spin
around on my ceiling.
Purples, blues, yellows.
Circles, spirals, triangles.

I lie on my bed, my feet
propped over my open sketchbook.

I haven't designed anything tonight.

How's your art project going?
she asks.

Not bad.
How's yours?

Not bad.

7. What is P?

They still make me go
to Mr Harris' after-school
maths practice.

You don't have to answer anything today,
Morgan. I just want you there.

It sounded okay then
in the corridor, lights shining
on his gentle bald head.

Now it's worse.

It's eleven of us at the front
crammed like sardines
in this sad orange room

Zane scuffs his foot like always
Squeal, squeak, squeal, squeak
I pick at the peeling plastic edge
of my desk

Ellie, if P equals two G plus four H,
G is three and H is five, what is P?

I don't know sir.

Well, what is G?
His pen taps the board.

Three?

Okay, now what's two times three?

She's counting on her fingers
and he's telling off Zane's scruffy shoes
the way he kicks them over the lino

Pack it in lad, come on.

I'm counting the seconds
the big hand ticking whilst
my compass scores the desk

Yes, good. What is H… Beth?

His words blur together.
The compass lines blur too,
a metal point picking up
plastic shavings

Round and round
cutting up the desk-wood
in the shape of four letters:
A - B - B - Y

The compass carves out
what's left of her place in the world
scratches at, traces over,

Her permanent name

The compass

Slips

Into my arm.
Scratching her name.
In blood.

I gasp, sharp.
I drop the compass,
but my arm is as pale as ever.

No blood.
No scratch.

Anyone else? What is P?

8. Soldier in the Sand

Thursday, we walk alone
above the hollow cliffs.
There's poppies on the railings,
and a WW1 soldier sketched in the sand
for Remembrance Day, when Mog says

What if we tagged her name around?
I could buy some spray paint –

You can't be serious.

The harsh wind blows pipes
through the caves and snatches at

our words so no one can hear us.
Mog goes to open her mouth.

No, great plan, I say.
No problems with that at all.

I can't just do nothing.

They'll kick you out, Mog.

So what?

Then I'll have lost both of you.

She scuffs her trainer on a loose

pebble skittering

sends it

down

the cliffs

the rocks

to the sea
where Abby
might've died.

Being excluded isn't
*the same as **dying**, Jake.*

Don't snap back. Don't.
It's just Morgan's violent tongue.
I don't ask how she'd feel if
the police cornered her.

We can't, I say. *We just can't.*

The tide is coming in now
Like the fizz of a poured-out can
Flooding grooves in the sand.

The waves wash at the soldier.
His sandy eyes dip below
that watery tidal advance,
leaving the ghost of his uniform
headless beneath the horizon.

Fine. It's just, I don't
know how else to, you know –

I know.

She's just gone.

I've been thinking,
what if we went to see
that old ship in Hartlepool?

The one she was always
on about? The… Trimkee?

The HMS Trincomalee.

Alright. Sounds nice.
How would Saturday be?