

How Proud?

'It is about growing the pie and everyone sharing in the fruits...'

— from the 'Levelling Up' foreword by Michael Gove & Andrew Haldane

The Agenda promised to be broad, deep
and long-term – so far so sexy.

Your town has come up lacking.

Kitchen-cum-dining room-cum-office.
Spreadsheet-made-table-made-graph.

Like TV detectives, they slid photos across the table:

the broken washing machine in the yard,
the Nissan Micra double-parked.
Empty baggies and silver canisters on the train tracks.

Sure.

How proud?

On the life expectancy map our patch
was the darkest blue: the youngest deaths.
Some of us in the room were older than it said we'd live to.
We revelled in our impossibility, felt immediately

sick.

They dealt us civic tarot:

A mortarboard / A crane moving a block / A leaf with an electrical cable for a
stem.

How Proud?

A mechanical arm / A cardboard box / Windmill / Windmill / An Atom.

How Proud?

In the focus group we brought up The Youth.

We'd seen their bored fingers pull fluff from the bus seats.
They were capable of anything. We were frightened.

They found our glasses.
They set our digital watches to the correct time.
They lip-synched to the leaked audio of our concerns.

There was talk of *Ambitious medium-term missions*... It sounded wrong. Silent scream. Upward fall. Same difference.

When they drew the unbreakable link between *Geography*
and *Destiny*,
we saw a shaft of golden sunlight gracing
the neighbouring town.

It was chilly out that night.

The algorithm suggested:

THINGS YOU ONLY KNOW IF YOU'VE LIVED ON *THIS ROAD*

Sweet familiar. We warmed our thumbs on it.

On a scale of 1–10 how hard would you thump your chest for your town?

How many bowls of your grandmother's stew would you forego for a new leisure centre?

If your local park were a block of flats, how many would you covet?

They levelled the library.
They levelled the post office.
They levelled the community.

We kissed our families. We couldn't love them more.

Ella Frears' collection *Shine, Darling* (Offord Road Books, 2020) was shortlisted for both the Forward Prize for Best First Collection, and the T. S. Eliot Prize for Poetry. She is currently a Creative Fellow for Exeter University's Environmental Marine History department, as well as a new RLF Fellow at the Courtauld Institute of Art. Ella has taught creative writing for the *Guardian*, Goldsmiths University, City Lit, Dartington, the Arvon Foundation among many others. She hosts *Tears for Frears* a quarterly show on Soho Radio about the moments – big, small and unexpected – that move us to tears.

