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If Devo Manc was an
animal, what would it be?

A whale – a dark shadow lurking under the water, just a silhouette. And then eventually it will come up and shoot out water from its blowhole.

Hamaad, 15 years old, Team Future, RECLAIM

The Whale

by Sarah Butler

A lot of people didn't even notice it arrive; a dark shape in the canal. Just a trick of the light, some said. Just a figment of the imagination. It couldn't fit, said the practically-minded – a whale in a canal? Impossible. If it did exist, it would die soon enough, said others, and then who was going to clean up the mess?

But as time passed, more and more people sensed its presence: a flicker at the edge of their vision; a shadow passing beneath them; a low, echoing tremor reaching across the region. It was spotted in the city centre, cigarette butts and beer cans and sodden cardboard riding on the curve of its back. It was seen out towards Ashton – 'I saw its eye,' a man swore in the local paper. 'Staring at me from under the water. Somebody needs to do something about it.'

It travelled to Mossley and to Marple, to Bolton and to Bury. People said it had been sent from London: it had swum all the way to Manchester from the river Thames. Send it back, people said. Tell them we don't want it. But others shook their heads. It was an opportunity, they argued. It was a moment in history. It would change everything for the better.

But as with any news story, people got bored. The papers ran out of things to say. #ManchesterWhale fell into obscurity. There were wars and benefit cuts and videos of cats to take up people's attention. The whale was there, that was more or less agreed on by then, but it hadn't made much difference to anyone.

It was a hot summer's day, the first time it emerged from the depths of the canal. There was only one witness – a homeless man, sitting on the towpath, soaking the warmth of the day into his skin. The whale arched out of the water in front of him, the curve of its body like polished black marble, a shoot of white bursting from its blowhole with a sound like a trumpet. The man lifted his head and felt water fall fresh and cool onto his face. The whale sank back into the canal and was gone. The man did not tell anyone what he had seen – he had lived long enough to know that nobody would believe him.


The next time, a group of office workers saw it, and then a whole class of school children who whooped and hollered, chasing each other through the cascades of water. Newspaper photographers flocked to the canal. Biologists made statements – it was an air hole not a water hole, they said, so the whole thing was impossible, preposterous. Twitter exploded with sightings and speculation. Politicians urged restraint. Nobody was quite sure what any of it meant.


The whale continued to lift itself out of the canal, revealing its dark beauty, showering the city with water, trumpeting its presence. And gradually, the city grew used to it, fond of it, in fact. ‘We’re the city with the whale,’ they would say. T-shirts and badges were made, screen-printed bags and glazed coffee cups, all with the whale bursting out from the city’s waterways. School kids voted it the best fountain in Manchester. Politicians learnt to use its presence to their advantage. There were those who remained sceptical – of its bulk, of its shadow, of the motivations of whoever had brought it to the city. But it was there now, and the people came together around it, lifting their faces to the sparkling water, listening to it sing.


This is one of three stories by Sarah Butler which explore what Devo Manc might be and mean for the city. Sarah met with a range of academics working on Devo Manc, as well as other residents and campaigners in Manchester. She asked each of them: If Devo Manc was an animal, what would it be? Their answers inspired the three stories.

This work was commissioned by Manchester Urban Institute and funded by The Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) Impact Acceleration Account.

The Manchester Urban Institute (MUI) aims to contribute to the realisation of more inclusive and just cities that are both environmentally and socially sustainable for the current and future generations through world-leading research, engagement/impact and training activities. For more information, please visit the MUI website.

 www.mui.manchester.ac.uk


 mui@manchester.ac.uk


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The Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) Impact Acceleration Account-funded hub brings together work from across the University of Manchester on Devo Manc. More information is available at:

<http://www.mui.manchester.ac.uk/devo-manc/research/>

Sarah Butler explores the relationship between writing and place through prose, poetry and participatory projects. Recent writing residencies include writer-in-residence on the Central line; at Great Ormond Street Hospital; and with people living in temporary accommodation in East Manchester. She has two novels published by Picador in the UK and with fourteen international publishers: *Ten Things I've Learnt About Love* (2013) and *Before The Fire* (2015).

 www.urbanwords.org.uk

 www.sarahbutler.org.uk

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