

John Martin,
'Hyde Park', c.1815.



What Three Words is This?

Alison Habens

1.

The only time I go outside is in Street View. I get my exercise walking around Hyde Park in Google Maps. Scrolling past the stone terraces, clicking along the candy-cane railings, skirting the Ladies Mile.

I know all the people in Bayswater: boy with a backpack, lady with a peacock hat. It's always the same day: traffic light, weather fine. I walk through a family group on the path; dragging scenery, lagging greenery, past the last Street View man and his dog in mouse clicks, as close to the Serpentine as my computer can go.

Normally, there's nobody at the water's edge, not on that spot. Further along, by the Italian garden, a woman pushing a pram, a toddler riding a trike. Not this serpent coming from the lake. A person with no legs: tail snaking onto the footpath. But, full screen, it's a pencil skirt, a trail of pixelated pinstripe. Her blazer buttonholed with a dripping water lily. Her barnacled bowler-hat.

I cannot finish my walk round the Long Water. Leaving the window open, I come back to that scene later, for it can't stay open-ended all night. I swipe left to check her out from the West Carriage Drive. Is she higher up the bank? A blurred gaze follows me as I back off, clicking wildly, her cubist features turning to watch me go.

Panting, in my pyjamas, I get back to my house on Google Earth, loving how it looks with me inside. There's no face at the window, peering out for rain; I was asleep that day, weather light, traffic fine. I know it is just the internet, just the screen, just the game, just a dream.

I go out again at dusk, scrolling down Lancaster Gate, past stucco façades to the Tube station. Not many people about: backpack boy, the lady in an azure tit-for-tat. I drag slowly to the right; my computer is so laggy tonight. At the park entrance it stops.

Patrolling my own portal, I know who should be frozen mid-stride and who I should not see. Street View is playing tricks on me. It's the snake-haired accounts manager I saw crawling from the water. That cthulhu businesswoman has moved again.

She has crossed Hyde Park and is coming through the gate, fronds of pondweed on her shoulder pads. She's no Street View person; she is some witch who can shift between levels, a siren superimposed on the scenario, a glitch in the programme.

The next time, and the last time, I check my house in Street View, she is there. She's leaning in to look through my net curtains. She is right outside.

I know it is just the internet, just the screen, just the game, just a dream. But I look up at my window.

Face pressed to glass, the dead double-entry bookkeeper of the Serpentine has come to check her figures. The dripping pinstripe PJs. The drowned briefcase.

2.

They say that if you appear on Google Street View your soul is taken. With a crowd in the town centre or alone in a country lane; you may not know it has happened. Many Street View people have never googled themselves.

The road home from work every day, or an avenue strolled once in a lifetime; most folk don't think to check their routes on Google Maps to see if their spirit belongs to the internet. But they should.

The man in a checked shirt at Trafalgar Square; the woman in pink shoes at Piccadilly Circus; the group of lads crossing Ladbrooke Grove; the girl smoking in Mornington Crescent. Their faces have been blurred out but their walks are in the public domain.

The ones who saw the camera car, who ogled back as it passed, have more clout against the giants they'll meet in the cloud, the spiders they'll see in the web, the trolls they'll encounter on the internet. Those who are caught more than once, a few steps apart, become the biggest influencers; if only they knew it, all of YouTube is theirs ...

They say that, when you become a Street View person, your Facebook starts to predict the future. Your timeline gets ahead of itself. Not instantly; a deeper wrinkle, a thinner hairline, a thicker waist won't show at once.

The selfie-takers notice it first: a deeper tan, a thinner thigh, a thicker lip. How do I know? Not because 'they' say so: because it happened to me, or will happen, or is happening to me now. And it could be the same case for you. How to claim for your missing soul (without a long wait on a telephone helpline)?

Check your house on Google Earth to be sure there's no green-skinned, weed-haired undine, or shell-boned undead sailor about to peep through your letterbox. Check facelessbook in case you didn't post this update, didn't up this postdate, didn't date this post up.

Check that your thousand followers aren't actually sitting in your house, in the middle of the night; though you would hardly be relaxing at home when a vintage tea-cup dealer you follow on pinterestless lives a thousand miles away and is waiting to be liked.

Keep checking that you're still there. Take your own photo against famous places and familiar landmarks; be seen on beaches, with babies, in Buddhist poses.

They say there's an epidemic of depression, a plague of anxiety, the downloading of our souls, a cross-posting of ghouls and goolies. They say the world isn't what it used to be, people aren't what they were: in the checked-shirting of Neverland, the pink-shoeing of Narnia, the vintage tea-cupping of Nirvana, the soul is ink-black; a teardrop tattoo under eyes that can't close.

Just the screen, just the game, just a dream: 'what three words' is this? While someone, somewhere, is online, you too must be insomniac on the wide web, wobbling like a dew drop on its threads. I am a lady smoking in Ladbroke Grove, so I know: I could be googled any moment. And when I scroll down on my timeline, I can see the day I'll die.

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