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As bees flee hame wi' lades o' treasure,
The minutes wing'd their way wi' pleasure;
Kings may be blest, but Tam was glorious,
O'er a' the ills o' life victorious!

Robert Burns, 'Tam o' Shanter'

Tam o' Shanter • *An Introduction*

A long time ago, some two hundred years and more, a Scottish poet by the name of Robert Burns (1759–1796) wrote a very long narrative poem called 'Tam o' Shanter', a poem still known, loved and recited the world over today. From Burns Suppers to verse-speaking competitions, from ceilidhs to Hogmanays, the words of the poet continue to ignite many a gathering, and Burns remains, for many, Scotland's national bard.

During his own lifetime, Burns developed a reputation for being a poet of the people, writing in Scots and English on subjects as diverse as nature, politics, class, character, friendship, love, and the list goes on. Addressing some of these subjects and many more through a galloping plot by turns humorous, horrifying and heart-racing, 'Tam o' Shanter' almost unquestionably stands out from Burns's vast catalogue of poems as his most epic, in every sense of the word. A showpiece.

To fully appreciate this book and the poem it contains, some familiarity with the original poem that inspired it is

desirable. To that end, those new to 'Tam o' Shanter' (and those for whom a wee refresher would be welcome) are invited to coorie in and hear the tale of a farmer and his horse on the scariest, most unforgettable night of their lives. Saddle up: it's going to be a wild ride!

The story begins in Ayr, a town in Ayrshire on the west coast of Scotland. After a hard day's work at market, a local farmer called Tam (from Shanter Farm; hence the poem's title) is to be found boozing into the night with his cronies down the pub; his favourite activity. Back home, his wife, Kate, is not impressed. She's warned him time and time again not to stay out so late. She's even had a vision of him suffering a terrible fate if he continues to party on. But her warnings are ignored. Tam's having too much fun with his pals, oblivious to the great storm now brewing outside the pub.

But no-one can hold on to such a pleasurable scene forever. Eventually, Tam sets off for home on his trusty horse. Enter: Maggie. (The owner of perhaps the most famous bottom in all of Scotland!) Their journey takes them past grim omens and through torrential weather till

– in the village of Burns's birth – Tam spots Alloway Auld Kirk ablaze. Despite Maggie's reluctance to approach, Tam, drunk and unafraid, investigates. Is the church on fire? No. It's lit from within. It's . . . a party?! With witches and warlocks and all the creatures of Hell and even the Devil himself, playing the bagpipes, no less!

Tam watches from a window, agog, aghast. The vision is a terrifying one. He cannot look away. And then he spots her: Nannie. In this crowd of old, wrinkled hags, Nannie is the youngest witch; the youngest, prettiest, hottest, sweatiest witch. And she's so sweaty, she's stripped off down to nothing but a short nightshirt: her cutty sark.

Regrettably, all else forgotten, there's only one thought in Tam's scrambled mind at the sight of her and that thought, dear reader, is *hubba-hubba*.

Then—stupidly—foolishly—Tam calls out to the young witch – "Weel done, Cutty-sark!" he roars – inadvertently revealing his presence to all at the dance. Whoops!

And that's when the lights go out.

The blackout is enough to spook both horse and rider, and they set off at an almighty gallop. But the witches and

their entourage aren't far behind. They've given chase!

(—and here Burns weaves one of if not the most famous sequences in all of Scottish literature—)

Knowing that witches cannot cross running water, Tam and Maggie make a beeline for the river and the Brig o' Doon. If they can make it past the keystane – the middle of the bridge – they'll be out of the witches' reach and home safe. If not, it's lights out for them both.

And it looks like they're going to make it till, at the very last second, the fastest witch – Nannie – leaps at Maggie, grabs her tail, and rips it clean off. Ouch!

Finally—shaken—traumatised—the pair arrive home, safe. Tam tells his wife of the nightmare ride; Kate doesn't believe a word of it. But Tam, courtesy of the poor horse's still-smarting bottom, has proof.

And so concludes the tale of Tam o' Shanter.

Tam o' Shanter.

That all happened a long time ago. Just a story.

But now something is stirring.

A new storm is brewing.

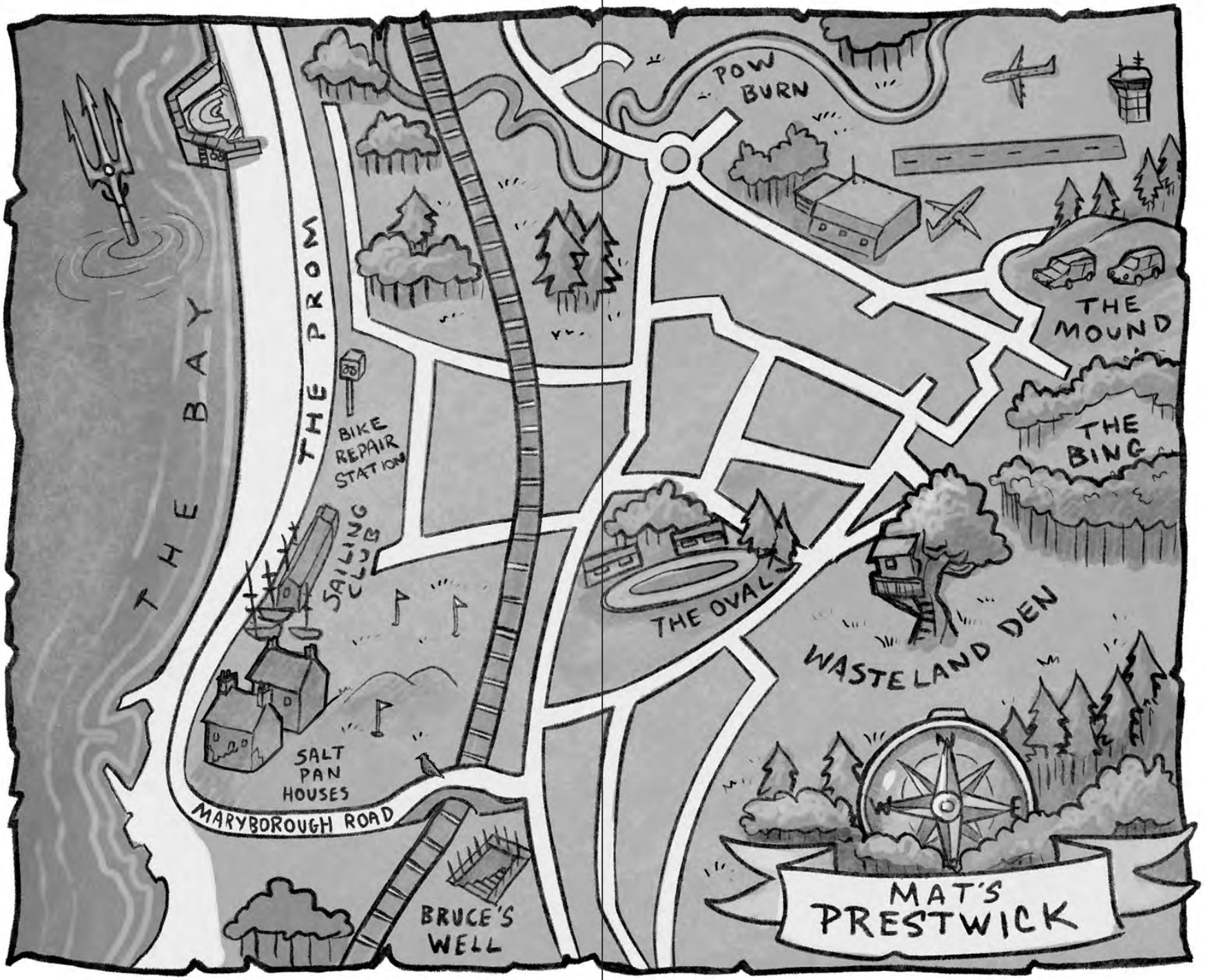
Read on . . .

Mat o' Shanter • *A Cautionary Tale*

When the spirits are low,
when the day appears dark,
when work becomes monotonous,
when hope hardly seems worth having,
just mount a bicycle and go out
for a spin down the road,
without thought on anything
but the ride you are taking.

Arthur Conan Doyle
as displayed on the bike repair station on
Prestwick prom at the time of this poem's composition

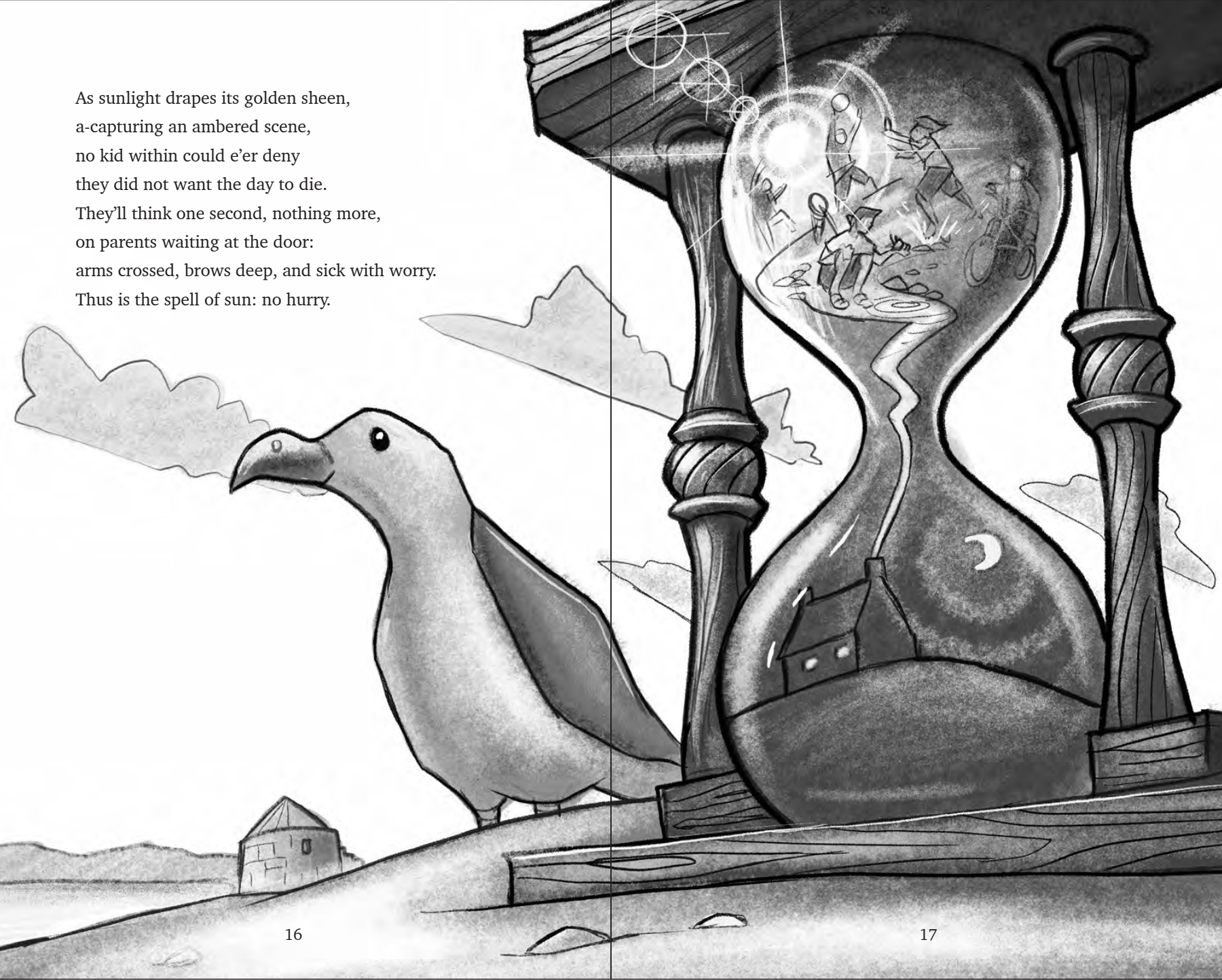



THE BAY
THE PROM
BIKE REPAIR STATION
SAILING CLUB
SALT PAN HOUSES
MARYBOROUGH ROAD
BRUCE'S WELL
POW BURN
THE OVAL
THE MOUND
THE BING
WASTELAND DEN
MAT'S PRESTWICK

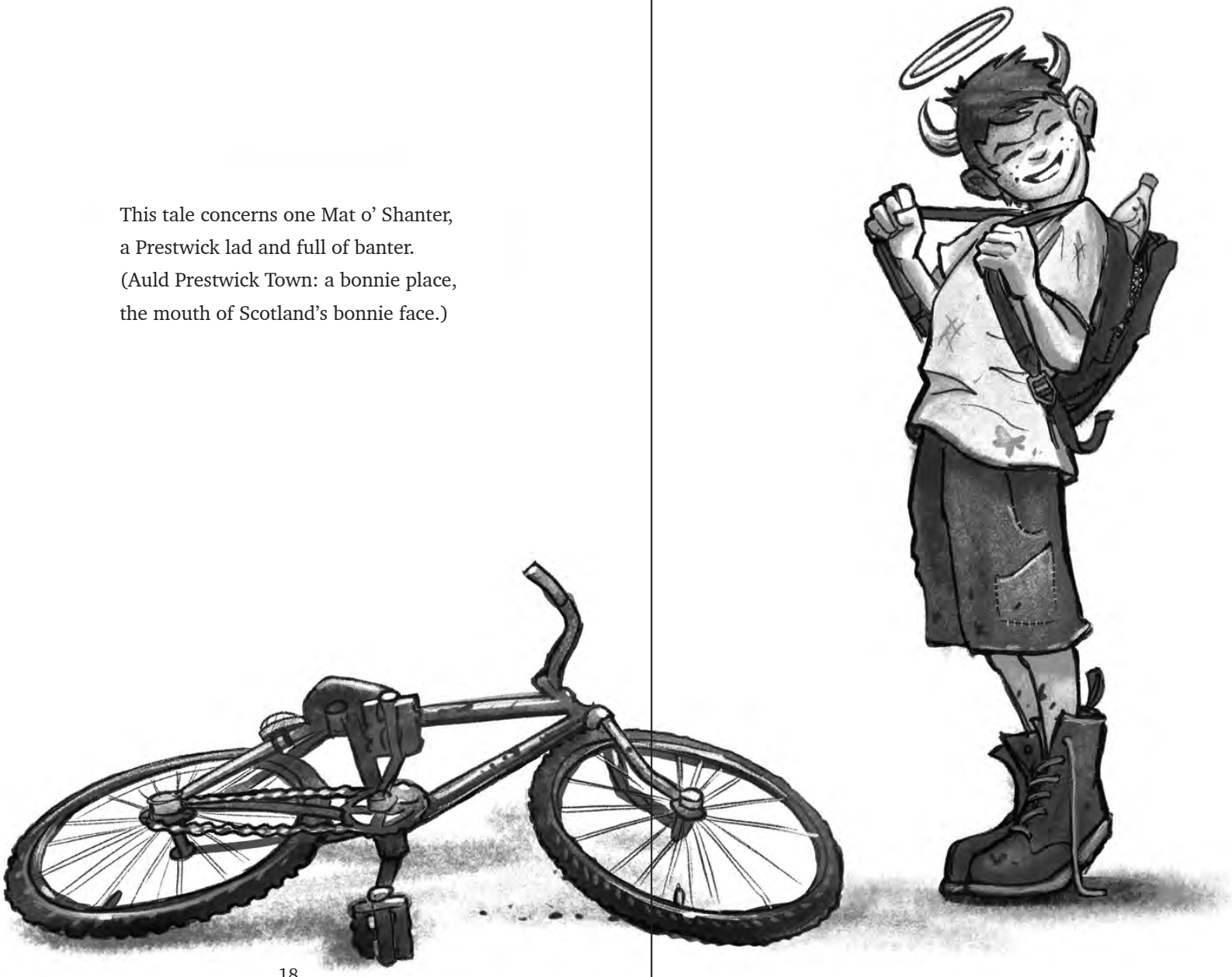
When sun-soaked days are still in reach
and friends are drawn towards the beach
to splash and laugh along the bay,
we let our childhoods loose to play.

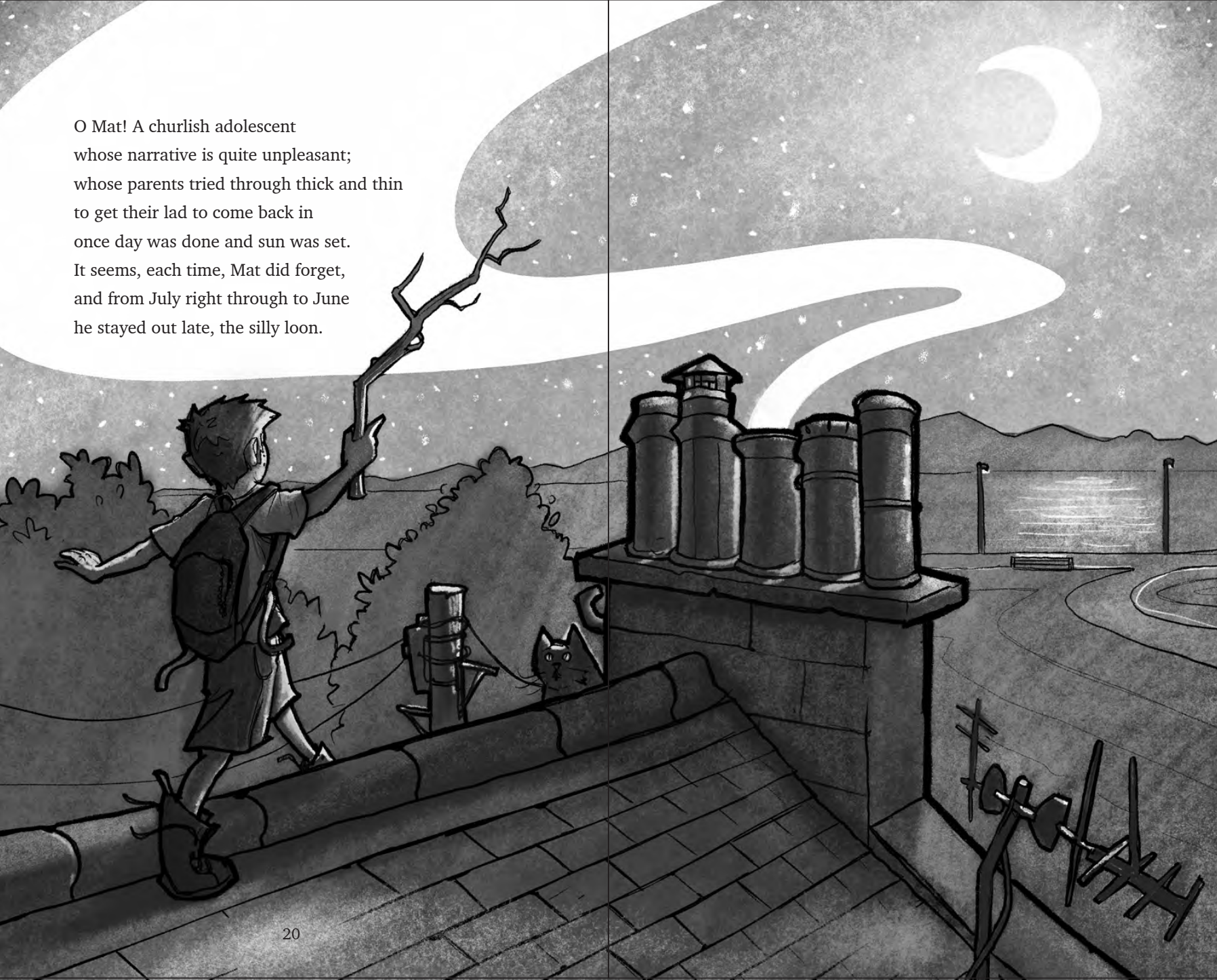


As sunlight drapes its golden sheen,
a-capturing an ambered scene,
no kid within could e'er deny
they did not want the day to die.
They'll think one second, nothing more,
on parents waiting at the door:
arms crossed, brows deep, and sick with worry.
Thus is the spell of sun: no hurry.

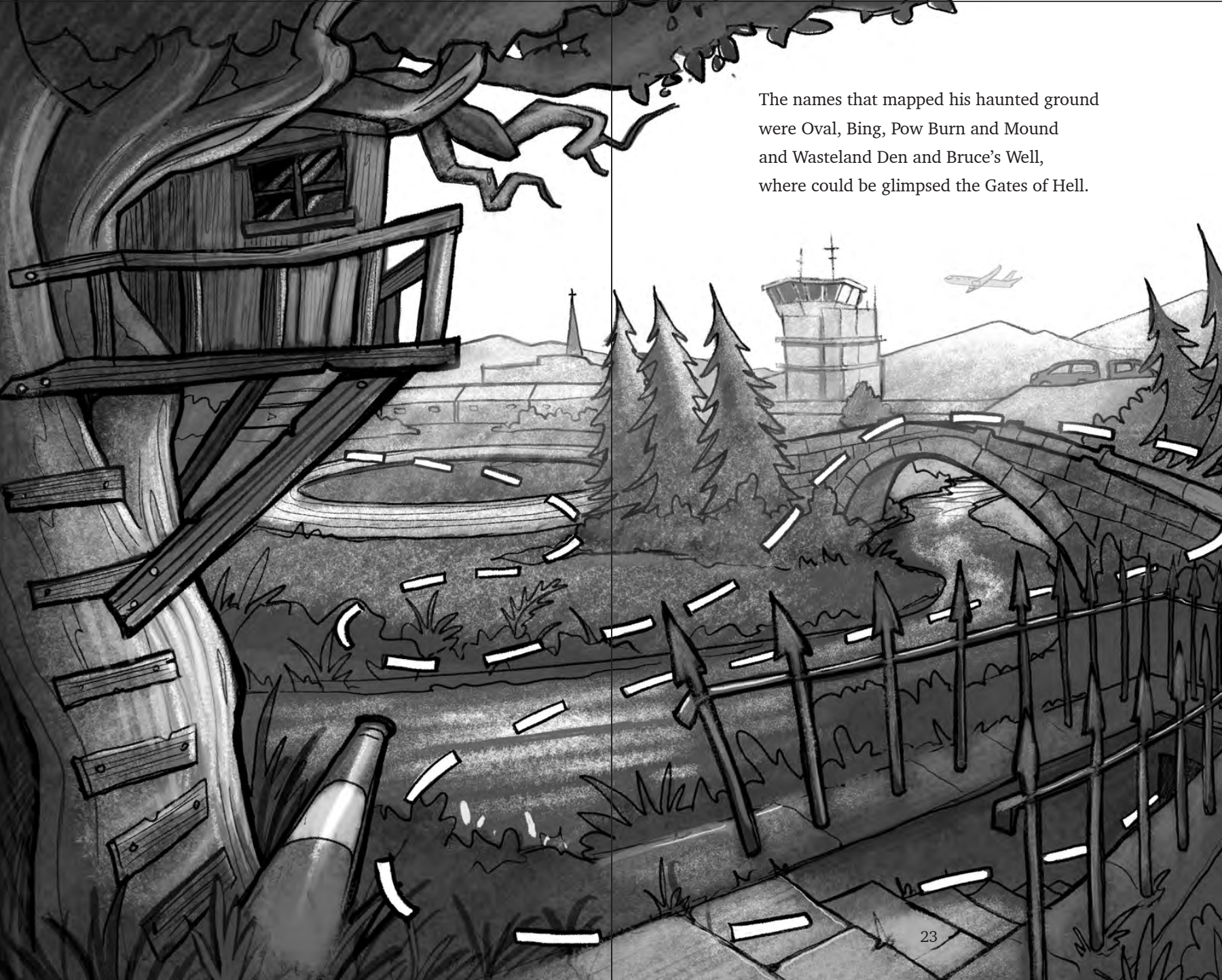


This tale concerns one Mat o' Shanter,
a Prestwick lad and full of banter.
(Auld Prestwick Town: a bonnie place,
the mouth of Scotland's bonnie face.)



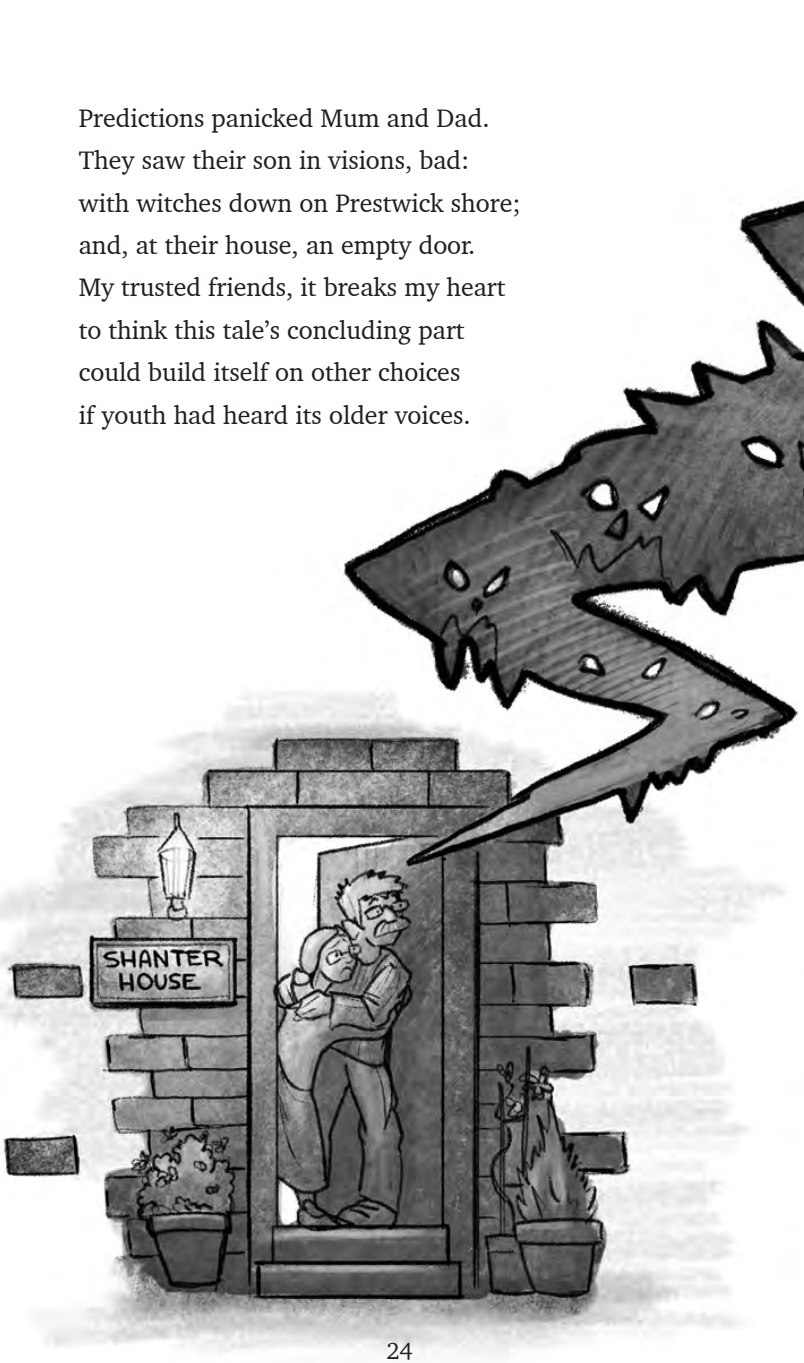


O Mat! A churlish adolescent
whose narrative is quite unpleasant;
whose parents tried through thick and thin
to get their lad to come back in
once day was done and sun was set.
It seems, each time, Mat did forget,
and from July right through to June
he stayed out late, the silly loon.



The names that mapped his haunted ground
were Oval, Bing, Pow Burn and Mound
and Wasteland Den and Bruce's Well,
where could be glimpsed the Gates of Hell.

Predictions panicked Mum and Dad.
They saw their son in visions, bad:
with witches down on Prestwick shore;
and, at their house, an empty door.
My trusted friends, it breaks my heart
to think this tale's concluding part
could build itself on other choices
if youth had heard its older voices.





But to our tale . . .