

It's early. They're riding out the Wirral to Bidston Hill, to the Lighthouse.

I will make my Will this July day in the year of 1800.

You think of a lighthouse, and I'll wager you think of a shoreline with a round white tower, a giant lamp at the top and a man to light it, don't you? How did that happen, when it's me, a woman, keeps the flame at Bidston, the tower is an octagonal of pink sandstone and the whole block a good two miles inland atop a great hill? The only bit of truth in there is the giant lamp!

It's an all-day-all-night watch here or there's Mockbeggar wrecks to answer for and a reckoning in the Rock Channel. The way in to Liverpool is no ways straight. All vessels must pilot through the sandbanks; taking bearings from our Leading Lights at Bidston and Leasowe. Line them up, watch how you go and Liverpool dock can't say no.

It's an accident of a profession: lighthouse-keeping. A woman marries into it or is born into it. She devotes her life to it even if she doesn't hold the post. A good keeper dies in service too. And that's what I'm busy with right now.

I'm lying here, nearly done. It's murky out there. Is there a fog down? The seas are singing. There'll be much lamp work this night - but I'm past helping them now.

I'm as hot as the flame in the tower. The cotton wick burning.

I can't think ... Trim it, trim it ...

I can't see straight ... Where's the oil?

Get up those steps, it's past the four! Quick now, the reservoir needs filling, not spilling!

A nervous breeze ruffles the gull's wing. Nudging for flight.

I trace my fingers over the flat lines of the goddess carved in the stone.

Her arms outstretched, the sun at her feet.

Her head facing where the sun sets on Midsummer's day.

She never lies.

I'm burning now with the stench of fish oil and the threads on the flags screaming from the poles.

A ship, a ship. A slaver's pennant streaming from the mast, they're in from the Africas with a bellyload. A hoard of half-dead souls for the selling. Run out, Will, raise the signal, the pilot's veering east off the bank. That's Van Harden's sign. Run lad. To the telegraph. Hoist van Harden's flag up the signal pole. Run!

The wind's up. The horny beak opens and the gull shrieks.

I tread the hill's heathland, past the windmill, uprooting the gorse, gaze on the cat-headed she-shape. The moon at her feet, she glows. She guides my weary limbs up the sticky stairs to the lantern, a drum of oil slung over my back like a mule up a mountain.

That's not me! I don't recogn- ... Or is it me?

What does it say?

'Elizabeth Wilding, Widow of the late Richard Wilding ... is hereby appointed Keeper of the Bidston Lighthouse ...'

Is it still my watch?

Hazard. A Hazard. She's running to ground. Hell to be paid if the vessel's lost ...

But a drink keeps the cold out, Captain.

Keep your wits about you now. There are merchant vessels in the Rock Channel. Tobacco, brandy and cotton. Lights are strong. Signal flags flying ...

Am I gone? Is that you, Mary? Where's your father?

I'm on my way. Never fear, there's money left for your little ones ...

Not long now. The bird's in flight. Fetch Ann for the signing.

Up you go, my tiny one. The glass must be spotless. Reflector needs polish, girl. Never mind the moths. Lives depend ... Lives de- ...

But who is she? Another keeper... Ann is come, you say? Good!

I will come from beneath to greet her, the next she-keeper. Already marked, though yet unborn, she'll step on the flat goddess' sandstone and marvel what the softening is. She'll marvel at my steps before her. I'll trip her one day, catch her. We'll walk the spikey heathland, and burn the midnight oil, both of us in service, in league with the moon and the sun.

Elizabeth Wilding (1747-1800), lighthouse keeper, Bidston, Cheshire

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