

Lain Sinclair : The Last London

So: the last London. It has to be said with a climbing inflection at the end. Every statement is provisional here. Nothing is fixed or grounded. Come back tomorrow and the British Museum will be an ice rink, a boutique hotel, a fashion hub. The familiar streets outside will have vanished into walls of curved glass and progressive holes in the ground. The darkened showroom of the Brick Lane monumental mason with the Jewish headstones will be an art gallery. So? The Victorian theatre on Dalston Lane is already a windblown concrete slab with optional water jets propping up a reef of speculative towers nobody can afford on a buttress of failed enterprises, themed restaurants forever changing their allegiance and retail opportunities nobody is rushing to take up, despite those elegantly faded CGI panoramas of satisfied customers who never lived in the world as we know it. So? I'm trying to teach myself the grammar of a terminated city in which every sentence begins with a confident clearing of the throat: 'So ...' That's the entry code. It's as if you've been shoved onstage, without lines, in a play you've never read. Smile brightly. Bluff like a politician in a glass booth being manipulated by semaphoring black-suited attendants with clipboards. So? 'All for the best in the best of all possible Londons,' says the mayor, says the minister, says Joanna Lumley. 'All for the best,' say the entitled, the connected, the stakeholders, the investors and the profit-takers.

That insignificant 'so' has moved with the times. When my children were teenagers, 'so' meant 'so'. So!!! So what? A hormonal challenge. Now it's a signifier, a warning bleep letting the recipient know that nothing that follows has any billable consequence. The speaker, the spokesperson, the hireling expert, is not accountable. Language in the last London is a negotiation, a spin of terminological inexactitudes. We are losing the ground beneath our feet. Slipping and sliding on subordinating conjunctions, we are disorientated. We feel as if we are falling as we walk, reaching out for anything cold and hard and more than a week old. In his book *Vertical: The City from Satellites to Bunkers*, the geographer Stephen Graham quotes Hito Steyerl, a German video artist: 'Many contemporary philosophers have pointed out that the present moment is distinguished by a prevailing condition of groundlessness.' * Call it ground-zero vertigo. Non-specific paranoia. Territory, as soon as it can be adequately surveyed by drones, or hard-hat visionaries in helicopters, from heights where even the Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park looks great, is only there to be explained, improved, colonised and captured. So? So? So what?

So when I think I'm moving across a city of memories, where I have lived and worked for fifty years, I find that, very soon, I lose the markers by which I have navigated, the beacons by which I know myself. Like John Clare leaving the tight circle of experience around the village of Helpston (then in Northamptonshire), I step out of my knowledge, to the tottering edge of an abyss known as 'the future' or 'the human contract'. Mortality. Of place and person. London rebrands as 'Smart City' (working in partnership with Catapult, the universities and Tech City to harness the power of the internet of things and the Cloud). So how dumb does that make me feel? How alienated and leaden-footed and stubbornly off-grid?

Drifting in a lazy, autopilot trajectory, my own cloud of unknowing, down Bethnal Green Road towards the pop-up shopping hub by the London Overground station at Shoreditch, I register a notice in a window that says: 'No coffee stored overnight.' Once upon a time, white vans (for white men) were nervous about their tools and ladders, but now the value is in coffee, barista coffee, gold dust: the marching powder of the shared-desk classes who are hitting it hard in recovered container stacks and bare-brick coffee shops glowing with an occult circle of pale screens and fearful concentration. Why do these digital initiates always look as if the screens hold bad news, as if the power is on the point of shutting down permanently, leaving them disconnected in outer darkness?

That coffee sign was a border marker, preparing me for a series of designated smoking areas, puddles of stubbed-out cigarettes, and a chain of opportunist businesses promoted by oxymorons: FREE CASH, IMPERIAL EQUITY, CITY SHEEPSKINS, RESPONSIBLE GAMBLING, TAPAS REVOLUTION, PROPER HAMBURGER. And of course Sainsbury's Local. When, in truth, there is no local left. Those signs confirm the dissolution of locality. The last London, Smart City, is nervous about unreformed localism, nuisance quarters with medieval borders clinging to outmoded privileges, like schools, pubs, markets or hospitals hungry for funds and resistant to improving the image of construction.

The Overground station at Shoreditch and the spill-area around the mainline station at Liverpool Street are just two of the places in London where packages of free food and drink are regularly handed out – sachets of iced tea, experimental energy bars, sugar boosts in silver cans – but the samples are offered only to bankers and gamers and content providers. As you emerge from the station, if you're part of the wealth-generating machine, someone will give you a complimentary shot of gin, a glossy magazine or a wafer of perfumed soap. It's like being upgraded to business class. But around the same stations, huddling by cash machines, lurking under railway bridges on cardboard mattresses, patrolling Overground carriages with looped sob stories, are the invisibles and rough sleepers and drug casualties, and nobody is bringing them any food-aid benefits. 'Have a nice day, have a nice day, have a nice day' is the endless mantra from the Big Issue salesman, wasting his unintended scorn on the passing mob.

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As you move through Spitalfields, the former vegetable market and interzone between the City and Whitechapel where successive waves of immigrants found shelter, you can't help noticing that this useful buffer has been reduced to a series of propped-up façades. In a glass panel above the cod-Milanese shopping arcade, as you enter the market from Bishopsgate, the tremendous steeple of Hawksmoor's Christ Church has been reduced to a quotation, desacralised and presented as a heritage pitch. Nothing has been lost, it says. The established buildings around which London evolved are all in place. But the framing somehow reduces the force of the original engagement. Leon Kossoff, growing up on these streets, came back time and again, crouching beneath the mass of that vertical thrust, sketching furiously, to keep it from tumbling down on him and obliterating his presumption.

The latest gimmick for the outlets in the Spitalfields arcade is poverty chic, designer Orwellianism. The first boutique I saw was called Urban Decay. Urban Decay is selling high-end lipsticks with an optional eye makeover. The next hutch is the Brokedown Palace. It is offering expensive Patagonia sweaters and pretty coloured rucksacks, so you can play at being an explorer within the safe confines of the city. An internal tourist, an aesthete of ruins with ethnic credentials. The last shop before the stalls of sloganised T-shirts, photocopies of graffiti, leather bags, is called Rag & Bone. No Steptoe operation this, but a retail gallery with three beautifully folded sweaters on a plain table, daring you to search for a price tag.

In the fugue of London walking, real feet on unreal ground, we have to deal with that sense of groundlessness, striding faster and faster in anticipation of a bigger fall, weaving hard to avoid the committed, heads-down texters and tweeters who seem to be programmed for impact. The ground is darkened by the long shadows of half-built vanity towers, investment silos and the flickering nuisance of sunbed clowns with sharky grins poking their thumbs at us from screens and hoardings. In Smart City, Donald Trump is a good thing. He makes the faultline visible. The gold-topped King Ubu of the internet has been generous enough to embody all the creeping horrors of corporate opportunism, all the self-serving, reflex mendacity of political operators with a more emollient pitch. The man is visible. He is loud enough to be heard across oceans. Nobody told this brainwashed Manchurian Candidate that he was supposed to shoot the president, not grab the throne for himself. That lurch into apocalyptic comic strip, peopled by grotesques, began around the Thatcher period; that was the beginning of my last London. Of course, there have been many last Londons. London stalls, revives, suffers and renews itself all the time; but now I anticipate an endgame for the kind of writing with which I have been associated. I have sprayed out too many unreliable facts. Too many counter-narratives. Too much alternative history in too many words.

I loved the novelty, in the Thatcher years, of striking off through the conflicted Docklands to Woolwich, Tilbury, Gravesend, as an entropy tourist with a fetish for future ruins. I was writing a novel called Downriver and walking, in dialogue, with the cultural historian Patrick Wright, who lived close to me in Hackney. We explored the territory together: the Bow Quarter development conjured from the Bryant & May match factory, the weaver's garret occupied by David Rodinsky above a decommissioned synagogue in Princelet Street, and the first speculative (and doomed) 'Montmartre meets Montserrat' restaurant on Dalston Lane. Wright managed to get an entire book out of a few hundred yards of old degraded Hackney – and, looking at the place now, you know he was on the money. Dalston Lane was the laboratory in which the wrong kind of future was being aborted: creative demolition, unexplained and uninvestigated arson attacks, compulsive façadism and glittering developments purchased by offshore investors. Dormitories for ghosts. And Hackney's first Premier Inn, built on a site owned by a property company based in West Yorkshire, and finessed by Dexter Moren Associates, a firm of architects also credited with the glitz of the Shangri-La Hotel at the Shard. Wright's book, *A Journey through Ruins*, was published in 1991. Coming back now to the true fiction of the street as it once was, I saw how prescient he had been, picking through the dirty footprints of Dalston Lane to sketch a firm outline around some of the predators lurking on the horizon. Looking hard at the proposed 'curved glass walls' of the 'civic pleasure palace' of the coming Hackney Town Hall, Wright conjured the excesses of Trump Tower in New York City. Intimations of the man himself. His boundless ambition and gambler's belief in magic.

A smudged deadbeat left over from the Reagan era ... and propped up in a temporary kind of way by ailing US and Japanese banks that couldn't afford to let him expire completely ... If Trump was in the White House which, as he was rash enough to hint in those undiminished days, he might well be before too long, then he could follow the examples of Presidents Reagan and Harding, and look for astrological anchorage in the stars.

1991: the occulting of power politics. Exorcism attempted by way of random walks and widdershins pilgrimages around simmering edgelands and motorway collars. London, as ever, flirted with dissolution. A repeated trope before and after wars, firestorms and bombs on the Underground. That shrapnel splinter in the trepanned skull of Louis-Ferdinand Céline, traumatised and exiled to London, to the labyrinth of Soho. This is from Guignol's Band:

Monster shops ... phantasmagoric storehouses, citadels of merchandise, mountains of tanned goatskins enough to stink all the way to Kamchatka! Forest of mahogany in thousands of piles, tied up like asparagus, in pyramids, miles of

materials! ... rugs enough to cover the moon, the whole world ... all the floors in the universe! ... Enough sponges to dry up the Thames! ... Coffee for the whole planet! ... enough to give a lift during their forced marches to the four hundred thousand avenging conflicts of the fightingest armies in the world.

Lastness reverberates. That impulse towards wiping the slate clean and starting over. 'London was, but is no more.' John Evelyn writing, after the Great Fire, with such relish in his plain statement of fact. 'London was, but is no more.' It reminds me of hearing Ian Holloway, the manager of Queen's Park Rangers, on the radio. He's got a nice West Country burr, very soothing for his employers. He was talking about his club's horrible run of form when he said, with disarming optimism, 'I think we're right on the crest of a slump.' And that's where the current last London seems to be: riding the crest of a slump. That madness of quitting Europe, burning our bridges, starving hospitals of funds, is part of a suicide-note delirium. When the worst is coming straight at you at a thousand miles a minute, embrace it. Evelyn made this entry in his diary for Sunday, 2 September 1666:

After dinner the fire continuing, with my Wife & Sonn took Coach & went to the bank side in Southwark, where we beheld that dismal spectackle, the whole City in dreadfull flames neere the Water side, & had now consumed all the houses from the bridge all Thames Street & up-wards towards Cheape side, downe to the three Cranes, & so returned exceedingly astonished, what would become of the rest.

Well, what indeed? That level of destruction, the act of a vengeful god returning our vanities to the smouldering waterline, provoked fantasies of a rational city, the white London that Wren projected, laid out on a grid of pride. This was the future London opposed. Its materialist convictions were not to be deflected. London is a single, swollen organism, a living entity – that's the given we have to acknowledge. We are part of every fossil-encrusted stone, every bloodied feather. As we walk, the city absorbs us, changes us, and allows us, if we are fortunate, to make our own small contribution. The city, before the Great Fire, was a dense forest of church steeples, a stone fleet riding at anchor; every mast or trunk in communication with the next, sustained like dying trees on transmitted sugars. And now it feels, in the addiction and vertigo of the digital revolution, as if this ancient organism is wheezing, drawing its final breaths. We were never more than an extension of the geology of the Thames Valley. London slithered from that sediment, unformed and latent, some time after the Roman invasion in 43 AD. It took a few years for the trading post to establish itself as anything more than a convenient crossing of that great river. Whatever emerged from the reeking mud built protective walls from its own substance. Every pore of this monster feeds us and feeds from us. Lodging here, we have accepted a social contract that is now wounded or broken.

At times of perceived crisis, there is always someone to blame, some other, the alien. After the Great Fire, London turned on French incomers and prepared for imminent invasion, the Dutch sailing up the Thames. Paranoia runs deep, it runs all through English literature, and it is often associated with the river. You arrive at a sensationalist hack like Sax Rohmer with his fear of the Chinese. He wrote a book called *The Devil Doctor*, published in 1916. Cover illustrations for cheap railway editions show Fu Manchu pointing a claw like Trump and sending his minions into the darkened city. Confronting this foreign devil, the English hero says:

A faint perfume hung in the air about me; I do not mean that of any essence or any incense, but rather the smell which is suffused by Oriental furniture, by Oriental draperies; the indefinable but unmistakable perfume of the East.

Thus, London has a distinct smell of its own ... Now the atmosphere surrounding me was Eastern, but not of the East that I knew; rather it was Far Eastern. Perhaps I do not make myself very clear, but to me there was a mysterious significance in that perfumed atmosphere. I opened my eyes.

By the second year of the First World War, strange smells, clouds of poison gas, were seeping into the imagination of the embattled city. Fu Manchu found his way, as Dickens had in *Our Mutual Friend*, to a Hawksmoor church, St Anne's in Limehouse. There is a pyramid with Masonic emblems in the grounds. It becomes the malignant doctor's entrance to the tunnels of a riverside underworld. And to a long line of conspiracies cooked by future London authors. 'Shoot down that damned Chinaman, Petrie! Shoot! Shoot!' That is the despairing cry of Rohmer's English hero, Nayland Smith.

With so many local libraries improved into 'ideas stores' and so many uneconomic books dumped in bundles on the pavement, I have become a keen reader of walls, notebook always at the ready to transcribe the latest spray-can revision to the great collaged newspaper of bridges and warehouses along the Regent's Canal. There is something fresh every morning. I had to make space for a new arrival: *SHOREDITCH IS THE REVENGE OF FU MANCHU*. I'm not sure what that means, but it sounds about right: retro like vinyl, and site-specific. It reads like a demented Trump tweet.

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This fascination with endgame London calls up the era of punk and the woman who factored punk sensibilities into a political philosophy: Margaret Thatcher. And what Patrick Keiller in his film *London* (1994) called 'a tyranny of the suburbs'. A brutal assault on the centre, the polis, before the hollowing out of Kensington and Chelsea, and the colonisation of Thames Gateway and the empty quarters of Essex and Kent. Once again the idea of the neighbourhood, the working community, came under attack. In 1986, the Greater London Council was dissolved. Financial markets were opened up, deregulated with the Big Bang, just as fiscal information began its streaming insinuation on electronic screens. The virtual overwhelmed the actual. London's status as an island, separate from the rest of Britain, was confirmed by the opening of the M25 orbital motorway, attended by snipers, helicopters and heightened levels of paramilitary insecurity: 120 miles of snarled-up tarmac replaced the symbolic remnants of the Roman wall.

In 1988, Derek Jarman made *The Last of England*. It featured royal weddings, the Falklands War, distressed street footage and rituals of exorcism around the decommissioned Millennium Mills in Silvertown. Punk tribes were expelled onto the river, cast adrift in boondocks that would soon be disputed as the site of a new and provisional London: airport, university, marina and conference centre, Olympic sideshows and secure arms trading. And much of it Chinese owned. Jarman's title recalled Ford Madox Brown's painting of 1855, depicting the artist and his wife as emigrants shipping out to Australia, part of an economic migration of around 350,000 disaffected British citizens. Posing his partner in a freezing Hampstead garden, Brown managed to make the experience look authentically grim. The shrouded couple are battened tight against each other, against the cold, their backs resolutely turned on the white cliffs of Dover. Bravely, they accept the same voluntary expulsion as so many characters in the novels of Dickens (and a few of his own brood). Brown's grandson was the writer and editor Ford Hermann Hueffer, later Ford Madox Ford. In 1909 Ford published an essay titled 'The Future in London', a provocative vision of a planned last city, a London circumscribed by the sixty-mile sweep of a compass point set in Threadneedle Street. He anticipated the urban planner Sir Patrick Abercrombie in reading London as a series of orbital hoops, ring roads and parkland. Brought to life on the edge of the river, this port settlement has always been a magnet for outsiders. It was constructed that way, developed to draw in the scattered tribes, the hut dwellers, to establish the importance of a river crossing. A satellite of Colchester, it was 100 AD before Londinium became a significant entity. And then it was lost, abolished, pulled apart, before it grew again.

Ford Madox Ford's Edwardian pipedream is ahead of its time. He sees that Oxford and Cambridge and the south coast are all part of the London microclimate. He sees the river coming into its own as an avenue for transport. He envisages escalators and moving pavements, and a population enriched and civilised by incomers. He presents himself as so much the English gentleman that he is doomed to spend most of his career in chaotic exile, in France and the US. Ford is self-condemned, like Wyndham Lewis. His London is as fantastic now as the Magnetic City, protected by river and man-made canals, in Lewis's *The Human Age* trilogy: 'The blank-gated prodigious city was isolated by its riverine moat.'

The compulsion to imagine and describe a final city runs from Richard Jefferies, with his *After London; or, Wild England* (1885), through Ford and Lewis, to the drowned worlds of J.G. Ballard and Will Self, the dystopian multiverses of Michael Moorcock and China Miéville. Fredric Jameson, considering postmodernism, talks about the 'hysterical sublime': a sort of Gothic rapture in contemplation of lastness, the voluntary abdication of power to superior aliens. This was heady stuff for my own compulsive beating of the bounds, an exploration of neural paths and autopilot drifts through the City into Whitechapel and Mile End. One of these haunted dérives brought me to the window of a bookshop in Brushfield Street, alongside Spitalfields Market. The shop, of course, is gone now and the proprietor dead. I zoomed in on an item with a striking riverside skyline on the dust-jacket: *Last Men in London* by W. Olaf Stapledon, published in 1932. Here was a more intimate coda to the better-known *Last and First Men* (1930). I had to carry the book home.

Millions of years into the future, an inhabitant of Neptune infiltrates the mind of a Londoner from the time of the First World War. An emerging human type is described, like a pre-vision of the limping psychogeographer or damaged fugue walker:

The kind of life into which these abortive supermen gravitated most frequently was a life of wandering and contemplation. Often they became tramps, drifting from one big town to another, trekking through agricultural districts, tinkering, sharpening scissors, mending crockery, poaching, stealing, breaking stones, harvesting ... The women were more unfortunate than the men, for vagrancy was less easily practised by women.

Well, I thought, we have something here. A useful synopsis for the neurotic peregrinations by which I have tried to engage with this unlovable and endlessly enticing city. Elective vagrancy underwritten by a comfortable home base. I had noticed, in recent times, how London was dividing its spaces between the gated compounds of the obscenely rich and the hides of the obscenely poor. There are taxonomies of contemplatives we hardly notice, as we speed, eyes down, about our business, under instruction from digital screens. Who knows if we are being programmed by the masters of Neptune, a zillion years in the future? Even in the small local park I visit every day, a necessary oasis, behaviour is increasingly strange. This morning a circle of around twenty young people were being instructed by their guru in how to

place one foot in front of another – with awareness. Some were yawning, fresh from bed. Others frowned at the enormity of the task: divorce from their electronic devices. This was a deprogramming exercise. But raised consciousness didn't stop them being totally unaware that their mesmerised circuit was blocking four paths, and frustrating cyclists, dog accompanists and park gardeners in motorised chariots.

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Haggerston Park has this magic: it is anchored and it floats. Part of its charm is a sense of enclosure. The park has high brick walls on three sides. They glow with infusions of sunlight and pollution. They are there because Haggerston Park was once the Imperial Gas Light and Coke Company. An important source of local energy until March 1945, when a V2 rocket scored a direct hit on one of the gasholders and destroyed the gasworks, the associated canal basin and a network of terraced streets. Like much of postwar London, the rubble ground was left in limbo until 1956, when it was proposed that a park, a very modest green lung, should be created. This was achieved, without fuss or fanfare, and opened in 1958. The design was by Rupert Lyell Thorpe, a former naval man and a London County Council architect. What Thorpe delivered was a fantasy ship with wisteria-curtained bridge, mast and compass. The nicely tended central meadow has been raised on the bricks of the lost streets. From the upper deck, park casuals can rest on the rail and look south towards the buzz of Shoreditch and the ice dentures of the City. Those windbreaks of curved brick are lifeboats for a coming apocalypse, the next meltdown of the markets. Unconsciously, Haggerston Park voyagers are readying themselves for a cruise-liner lifestyle, perpetual ocean tourism, when our cities are too dangerous to contemplate.

This park attracts a specialised clientele, the invisibles I mentioned, as well as the usual maelstrom of body-imagists with personal trainers and one-sided ear-worm conversationalists getting shot of inconvenient partners and resetting hospital appointments. I couldn't help noticing, at the north end of the park, in a shady cloister beneath the bridge of the ship, staring south at the giant sundial, a slumped figure I thought of as an unacknowledged sadhu of the city, a vegetative Buddha. This man is there the minute the park opens, around seven o'clock in the morning, and he stays until it closes at night. He never moves, not one step. He doesn't appear to eat or drink or smoke. He's like a great root dragged from the earth and left without nutrients. He could have been rescued from Shackleton's open boat. He seems to be rimed in polar ice, even in high summer. He's swaddled in many layers of clothes and his legs are like the trunks of condemned trees. The transients, spinning past, don't notice him. And he doesn't lift his head to adjudicate their nuisance. He is supported by many bulging plastic bags. The fattest of them says: EVERY LITTLE HELPS. Finding this man again, I experience an enhanced sense of my own identity as a person free to roam the city, in narrative negotiation, because my unknown friend elects to sit, to define his place. To witness and wait. I am comforted by his persistence, staying resolutely in his slump while hospitals and churches fall. But I am also aware, of course, that he's one of the damaged of the city. He is not here because Haggerston Park is an enchanted enclosure. He's here because he can't be anywhere else.

Go a little further and there's a scabby thicket, a secluded bench at the crest of a hillock. A couple of Asian kids occupied this bench in a fevered clinch before they went to school. But, despite the complexity of the embrace, both of them, over their partner's shoulder, were texting furiously. They were intimate and also separate, experiencing and commentating: just like writers, I suppose.

Coming home, right on my doorstep, I discovered eight unidentified officials in long dark coats, sinisterly Trumpish coats, and all of them with raised clipboards. It didn't look good. It spoke of yet more invasive improvements, major roadworks and compulsory purchases. My wife talked to their leader. She said: 'What are you doing?' And he replied: 'Oh, we're on a training exercise.' And she said: 'But what are you doing?' And the leader said: 'We're looking to see what would happen if we cut all the trees down.' And my wife said: 'But there aren't any trees.' And the man said: 'I know – it's only a training exercise.'

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To get some purchase on the way the city dreams itself into existence for another day, I decided to walk through the night around the replenished circuit of the London Overground railway: with inevitable detours, a distance of more than thirty miles. I'd done this walk by daylight, a clockwise tramp with Andrew Kötting, filmmaker and unstoppable performer. Shortly after we'd completed our blistering marathon, Kötting was returning to his home in St Leonards-on-Sea when he was sideswiped, thrown from his motorbike on the Old Kent Road. He came close to losing a leg, even his life. He fountained blood on the wet blacktop. A Polish policewoman, attending a local crime scene, rescued him and did all the right things. She saved his leg, but Kötting dropped into a tar pit on the dark side of consciousness: labyrinthine morphine dreams, the shredded acoustic whispers of the dead generations. It was a long time before he

recovered. Now he felt, as I did, that he needed to exorcise this experience. We decided to iron out the original Overground intrusion with another slog, by night, in the reverse direction.

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London closes around you in a wrap of unearned drunkenness; everything is soft at the edges, muffled in damp wool. You might tilt with exhaustion at any moment, but the city is talking to you in a different way, and you can feel that ripple of a communal dream as you move from area to area. Jungian archetypes progress, bed to ruffled bed, down the ladder of the railway. We made our way faithfully around the loop until we came to the hospital where Kötting was taken after the accident. The faintly illuminated building was on Denmark Hill, and we marched straight in, unchallenged, staggering under our huge rucksacks, grimy and sweating from the streets. The doors were open, surveillance monitors were operative. We enjoyed an interlude that seems unreal in retrospect, in suspension from the walk, wandering through the lost corridors of the night hospital, and channelling the sleep of restless figures in dim wards. Kötting's gratitude towards the policewoman and the hospital brought tears to his eyes. We understood how important these places were and how much the people who work in them deserve support. The hospital, like the city itself, is self-healing to a degree but threatened on all sides by supposed economic 'realities'.

It was night when we accessed the west door, but as we emerged, the sun was rising over the gardens of the tidy suburb, over the distant river. It was a transformative moment. I talked to Kötting about one of the casualties who had not been absorbed into any hospital or obvious system of care, the vegetative Buddha in Haggerston Park. When we struck out, early that evening, the slumped figure in his winter layers had migrated a short distance, from the park to Kingsland Road, where he sat on another bench, dead to the traffic. He was invisible to the excited swirl of hipsters, the digital mesmerism, nitrous-oxide bonhomie, the beggars and buskers. And now, coming to the end of our nocturnal exercise, replenished, renewed and talked out, I persuaded my companion to make one final detour: back to the park that is also a boat. It was around ten o'clock on a fresh morning and the grass looked polished. The shrubs were alert and confident. Our man was in place, the city was anchored. My filmmaker companion was rigged with a GoPro camera, a Cyclops eye in the centre of his forehead. He tracked slowly along the cloistered bench. He captured the slumped man, fixed him in place. My instinct was that we had made a bad choice in forcibly transporting this person from one form of reality into another. We returned home. I had a sleep, a cup of coffee, and went back to the park. The man on the bench had gone, and he never reappeared. I asked the park keeper about it, and he didn't know what had happened. He thought that the man came down on the bus, every day, from Stoke Newington. My discipline of neurotic mobility, endless and futile tramping and questing, had come into conflict with this ability to remain still and silent in one place.

About two months later, closer to winter now, I was passing through the park in the early afternoon: the sitter was back. He looked much the same, rounded spine, drooping head, but he had migrated to the far end of the bench. Recovering his sea legs? Picking up the new rhythms of the city as an inland ocean? Nobody, in the time of his absence, had taken over the former position; a few struts of the bench had been replaced and the flagstones beneath were stained, as if from a steady drip of body liquors. A crude crucifix was carved into the wood. The returned figure was another steerage-class emigrant out of Ford Madox Brown, wrapped against anticipated disaster. Everything bad in London was about to get worse, then terminal. The resting traveller had lost bulk. As I moved closer, I saw the clock had raced backwards: the sitter was twenty years younger and he was black. A different person making the same shape, recognising the singular virtue of the enclosure and honouring it. The new man was not ready to make this sitting a life's work. After a few hours, he got up. His spot was taken by a rough sleeper in an Arsenal football bag. And so on, one after another, the destitute monks of the city test themselves against wind and weather. The park is a last London: a site of endurance and abstinence. Qualities the poet Ed Dorn credited as 'the first law of the desert/to which animal life of every kind/pays allegiance'. Qualities required for survival in the bardo of Smart City, the gap between worlds. A new organism, soulless, conceptual, over-hyped, over-endowed with public money in the wrong places, is emerging. A new desert in which we will all learn to practise endurance and abstinence.

Here are a few lines from planners contemplating their own revised city. This is not the utopianism of Abercrombie or the civic altruism of the Attlee government.

Most of England's industrial settlements grew up a long time ago, when no one thought about town planning. Residential housing and factories of all kinds are therefore to be found right next to one another. In many cases, a tangled clutter has developed, posing considerable difficulties where contemporary standards of hygiene and the demands of public transport are concerned. Furthermore, the condition of the buildings in most old areas of workers' housing has gradually reached such a catastrophic state that hardly any of the old industrial towns have been spared from the 'slum problem'. By this is meant the problem of providing new, humane housing for many tens of thousands of people, while at the same time separating industrial and residential quarters and creating an adequate transport network. English industrial towns are typified by the cloud of smoke that is constantly lying over them.

This meticulously weighted report, with its concern for housing, hygiene and the dangers of industrial pollution, was compiled by the German military in 1940 as part of a pre-invasion assessment. There were aerial maps with lines around zones of special interest. There were photographs of bridges and factories, barges and boat races, 'maiden motorways' and downriver marshes. They formed an elegiac heritage album.

Those lovingly documented elements of London, canals and railways, harbingers of progress, are revised by every generation. Canal paths, forbidden in the days of active industry, are now hotly disputed territory. In the 1960s and 1970s, when I was doing labouring jobs in Limehouse and Wapping, it wasn't possible to walk beside the canal. The towpaths were therefore very attractive; they had to be infiltrated and explored. Beating forbidden bounds is one of the joys of the unknowable city. Then came the period of signposted leisure. The narrow margin between water and warehouse was invaded by coarse fishermen. There were still fish and eels aplenty in the murky shallows. But that monster pike is no longer to be found, the predatory herons have moved on. And the water seems to be dead. In any case, fishermen couldn't make a cast through the peloton of commuting cyclists, or the shoulder-to-shoulder joggers in charitable T-shirts and designer tights.

Between Victoria Park, the first of the parks opened for the people, and Broadway Market, worlds collide. Two young mothers were texting and being yapped at by older kids, while the youngest child circled on her scooter. There's a gentle slope down to the canal and the scooter picked up momentum, until the child disappeared over the edge, between two narrowboats, straight into the water. Fortunately, a morning cyclist was stepping ashore. He grabbed the child by the hair. All was well. A little further down the canal, where the path goes under a railway bridge, the mad pumping rush of the peloton swooped through – and a guy on one of those very thin-wheeled bikes was nudged into the soup. Right under, gasping and choking, still in the saddle. I helped to pull him out. The bike weighed nothing. The peloton did not stop. It is ruthless, a survival of the fittest ram-raid. Bells are for wimps. The dripping man wasn't concerned about his bicycle, he was frantic to locate his phone. Two walkers, ordinary unsuspecting pedestrians, were coming along. They were flung apart by the speed and backdraft of the peloton: one tottering on the canal's edge, one in the thorns. They had never been on this path before. And would, in all probability, never be on it again.

From time to time, as a record of how the city talks to itself, I took a note of the voices zipping past me, jabbering into the air. 'So, ideally, that works for you, basically, the 22nd?' 'So the problem is I don't know any proper men, all I know is women.' 'So it might be an idea if you speak to the concierge.' 'So, take them. I've got a whole fridge of fruit.' 'So, he's a chocolate maker, and that's very exciting.' 'So, dancing with a dog? Yeah, honestly, a dog.' 'So he said I should get Botox.' 'So I'm applying for a US teaching visa, but then I'm also going to apply for a German one just in case.' 'So they're raised in incubators all over the country, but once they mate, they mate for life. Boris is behind all that.' 'People are so hungry, they're starving – it's like sex on your wedding night.' 'So, Uber to Shoreditch House costs eight quid?'

I think about another thing John Evelyn wrote: 'I went againe to the ruins; for it was now no longer a Citty.' Is London still a city? I think it is. I think the traces of all the previous cities are here. At the Guildhall Gallery, in the heart of the City, I took the opportunity to inspect the Roman amphitheatre haunting the basement. Despite the soothing commentaries and the virtual ghosts, naked men posing and wrestling, the atmosphere had a distinct chill. You are reminded that ours is a city shared with those who preceded us. 'The living can assist the imagination of the dead,' Yeats wrote in *A Vision*. That's about it. If we can learn to listen and to wait, we might still serve some purpose, add a few words to the record.

Tom Raworth, one of the sharpest and best London poets, died in February. The news hit hard and carried me right back to the point where I began thinking how it might be possible to write something about the place where I lived. I'd been away for three months, labouring on another book, and feeling that the job was almost done: a prose memoir, told in fragments, breaking into short fictions. Checking in on one of the independent bookshops that were like clearing houses or noticeboards at that time – Indica on Southampton Row or Compendium in Camden Town – I spotted a new publication by Raworth, *A Serial Biography*. I scanned a few pages on my way home; when I got there, I dumped my own typescript in an old suitcase, where it still is. Raworth has always been a big influence, one of those presences felt when you trespass into particular areas of South London or parts of Soho, or take the trains that run between them. Here are a few lines, gleaned at random, from *A Serial Biography*:

I cannot drown. I am shockproof, fireproof, and immune to disease. I believe in what we do. I speak many languages. Air hostesses of all nationalities have served me and remember my face. I'm in here, somewhere, feeling the bit turn in the brickwork. Covered with a hard surface of purpose. They cannot reach me. Suspecting I am only a machine they are afraid to dissect me because of the secret. 'Torture gardens and scenic railways'. I go where they send me. To destroy or steal. To use or persuade. We went to the park and lost our way. Came out of a different exit and we walked in the wrong direction.