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*Hamish Hamilton*

PRESENTS

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# HACKNEY, THAT ROSE-RED EMPIRE

**A CONFIDENTIAL REPORT**

by

# IAIN SINCLAIR

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'Sentence for sentence, there is no  
more interesting writer at work in English'

**John Lanchester, *Daily Telegraph***

HACKNEY  
MARSHES

South  
Hillside



Hackney Cross



Hackney, That Rose-Red Empire  
by  
Iain Sinclair

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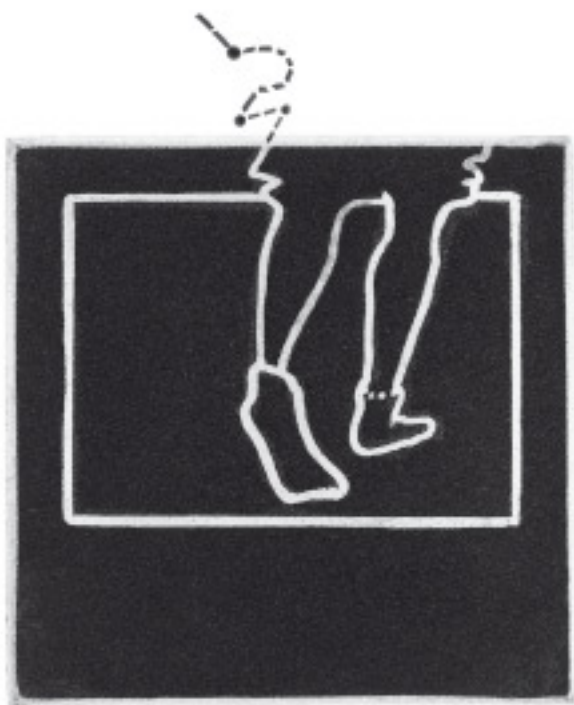


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## THE CYCLE



Geography is destiny.

James Ellroy

## *London Fields*

We are the rubbish. Outmoded and unrequired. Dumped on wet pavings and left there for weeks, in the expectation of becoming art objects, a baleful warning. Nobody pays me to do this. It is my own choice, to identify with detritus in a place that has declared war on unconvinced recyclers while erecting expensive memorials to the absence of memory. This is a borough that has dedicated itself to obliterating the meaning of shame.

I am coming west off the avenue, under a canopy of London plane trees old enough to appear in sepia postcards: coming home, at the end of an afternoon walk. Councils of sleek crows. Magpies imitating road drills. It's a habit I can't break, the habit of Hackney: writing and walking, thirty years in one house. Thirty years of misreading the signs, making fictions: with a bounce in the step, cartilage audibly complaining, like the electric coffee-grinder our children remember. And we have forgotten. Five miles of canal bank, Victoria Park, heights of Homerton; running over the day's work, half-noticing revisions in the fabric of things. But returning always, as light fails, to the same kitchen, a meal in preparation. The undervalued dispensation of domestic life.

Lines of trees outrank us, their bulk is astonishing. Skins encrusted with witness: patches of green over grey, over fleshy orange. Scars, carcinogenic lumps. Hawser roots suck at dirt. The avenues have been set, as we discover from old maps, in strict patterns, an arcane geometry. Aisles of grappling Neo-Romantic branches. A blood meadow: London Fields. Public ground for the fattening of herds and flocks, Norfolk geese, before they are driven, by very particular routes, to Smithfield slaughter. Chartered markets service drovers, incomers. They exist to peddle plunder and to fleece the unwary.

I've grown quite fond, lately, of that sculpture, a civic intervention, at the south-east corner of the Fields, near the drinkers' table; across from Sheep Lane and Beck Road, where the official-unofficial artists live. The professional alcoholics, out at first light, string dogs and blue bags, act as courtiers to a lifeless Pearly King and Queen; who sit, silent witnesses to so much agitation and hallucinatory folly. Crowned with bowler hats, eyes made red, they offer dishes of fruit from generous laps. A frozen tide encloses them, sea-pebbles, pebbledash. Mosaic altars have been decorated by schoolkids: lobsters, flying fish, crabs. In beds of lavender. Buddhas of the city, the statues survive, untargeted by fundamentalists, iconoclasts. The oracular indifference of this rounded couple is a virtue. They are assembled from chips and splinters of bright tile: reconstituted damage. The ruins of demolished terraces, which once ran to the edge of the Fields, have formed themselves into twinned, male and female, votive presences. They are authentically regal, divinely righteous, impervious to bribes or flattery. And they have adapted, graciously, to where they are, among rippling concrete dunes, troughs of hardy perennials, a backdrop of public housing. A small flock of grey sheep attend them, backs mossy with velvet. The whole tableau, its origins obscure, is being quietly absorbed into nature: 'economic migrants from an Antoni Gaudí theme park'. As a visiting, over-bright student said to me.

Going west, I dodge through the stutter of evening traffic and into Shrubland Road, at the point where it splits off into Albion Drive. A French culture pundit, digital camera in hand, tracking across from the nearest Underground station – which is not so near – was excited by the faded sign hanging outside the doomed public house, the Havelock. Plenty of Hackney old-timers, I discover as I conduct interviews for this book, navigate their memory-terrain by way of pubs. *Do you remember?* Being on first-name terms with the vampire landlady? Crowblack fright wig, purple talons, heavy gold manacles on thin wrist. Villainies of yesteryear: smoked ghosts propping up afternoon bars, sentimental about dead gangsters, shoplifting grannies. Holloway Nan. Shirley

Pitts. Or revived literary societies in back rooms? Politics, conspiracies, pool. The Havelock is an anachronism. The coalfire fug, dirty glasses and recidivist linoleum. These old brown boozers are London fictions in embryo, waiting for the right ventriloquist: Patrick Hamilton, Derek Raymond, T. S. Eliot. Listening is also writing. First the pubs, then the petrol stations: they are declared redundant.

Havelock, the face on the board, is now insulted by accidental tower blocks, an opportunistic sprawl of human storage facilities. By new natives, Catholics, Muslims. In life, he was a Bible-beating baptist. 'Deeply religious, a stern disciplinarian,' so they say. A baronet, India hand. Afghan campaign of 1839–40. The first Punjab War. He commanded a division in the Persian expedition of 1856–7. Before dying of dysentery. Which might offer a clue as to the origin of the pub sign that fascinates the Frenchman – who shows me his digital capture, demanding an explanation.

There are two Havelocks: on one side a white man in dress uniform, braids and buckles, and on the other, a black version of the same, the negative of the original print. This is like some anticolonial voodoo icon out of Haiti. That's what the Frenchman thinks. Havelock, the unbending officer of empire, revenger of Afghan outrages, blacks up to confront Hackney's shanty-town sprawl. Bowels excavated, he is white as a worm. Erased from history. A man forgotten. And a pub that is about to become a minor property speculation: aspirational flats with slender, bicycle-decorated balconies and an ecologically approved deficiency in parking space.

There is no sense of regeneration here. Thank god. Not yet. Business as usual. Cornershop steel-shuttered like Belfast and bristling with handwritten warnings to schoolkids. Hooded chemical brokers start young. And finish young too, many of them. But with old faces, fixed, incapable of registering surprise. Urban planners have tossed off a traffic-calming zone, a low brick enclosure where citizens can shoot the breeze, coming together, informally, to debate the issues of the day. A tub of mud functions as repository

for bright cans and yellow cartons with mouths agape like rat traps modelled in soft cheese. There is a buzz about this end of Shrubland Road, the mid-Victorian real-estate speculation by a relative of Cecil Rhodes. Terraces knocked up fast to the design of a man called Catling. The local authorities, back then, waived planning permissions, amputated portions of common land, the fringe of London Fields, and covered the ground with reefs of private housing. Albion does *drive*. The suburban pretension of that title is fully justified. A through-route fairground ride of humps and potholes that allows the statutory authorities to have it both ways: a cash cow of parking fines, road taxes, congestion charges *and* a method of crippling motor vehicles by neglect of the surfaces on which they are forced to operate.

Taking the right fork, into Albion Drive, brings me under the scratchy abundance of a fig tree that overhangs the pavement, heavy with sour-green grenades, polyps, empurpled fruit testicles. I suck its nectars, relishing the pointless fecundity. As twilight footsteps pad, closer, ever closer. In Hackney, we walk in a constant audition of sound, safe in the membrane of previous experience: the bad thing has not happened. Not yet, never. We are still here, still around; we must have made the right decision, crossed the road at the optimum time, avoided eye contact, jumped back from the kerb before the siren-screaming cop car rocketed over the humpbacked bridge. Motorcyclists slow significantly, sizing up our bags, checking on mobile-phone activity. Cycle bandits, out of nowhere, are at our shoulder. They nudge. Blade carving through straps. This is nothing, a toll on the privilege of living here; a community charge that sometimes, infrequently, steps over the mark: death. No longer a name on the electoral register, a statistic.

Preoccupied, contained in the dream of place, my harmless excursion, one walk fading into the footprints of the last, ruptures. With the breeze of the savage downward stroke, I swerve just enough to deflect the main force of the blow. Pain is nothing: a caressing slice into the skin of a balding cranium, no cerebellum-

denting impact. It's a paper cut. Nothing, nothing at the time. A shock, when it happens on safe ground. And at the precise point, Anna later remarks, where paving slabs give way to tarmac, lumpy porridge from an Irish cauldron. Broader avenues, like our immediate neighbour, Middleton Road, domicile of various Hackney councillors, are paved throughout.

I have been stabbed in the head, that's all. No ice pick, a kiss. Late afternoon, late autumn. Creatures of the shadows ducking under the radar. My reaction is immediate, instinctive, foolish. I grab for the youth. I think, strange as it seems, that he has stubbed out a light bulb on my naked skull. *Lights out*. A necessary warning against meditating on pub signs, statuary, cattle trails. My assailant is a justified critic. A guerrilla editor. He's away, between cars: into the Fields Estate, a warren. Anaemic brickwork with stains of yellow dribble from overflow pipes. Replacement windows that need to be replaced. A blue door. And in this portal, blocking access, the darkness into which my attacker has vanished, I come up against an awkward interference of asbos, all shapes and sizes, colours and ages. Unrepentant whites. Pre-Dagenham. A last hurrah for petty, malicious, lumpen aggravation. But there's no future in it, indiscriminate violence. Cash crime. They need a business plan, a sponsor. They have not yet been branded by the council as a 'negative youth affiliation'. Nobody puts them on television without a cellophane carpet of flowers, crucified teddy bears and handwritten poems.

It's my own fault, for being visible in my difference, and too ancient to be moving through this place at this hour. My history is all used up. No point, this rush of blood, in grabbing anyone, dishing out unwarranted retribution. Rage is a stupid affliction. A man, a couple of years short of sixty, reverting to jungle-law slapstick. Idiotic. Insane. Unless it becomes part of a book.

In the bath, when I washed off the dry blood, I found a delicate residue of eggshell. Some of the shards had to be picked out of the wound with tweezers. The boy, my assailant, had a very unusual

method of preparing an omelette. A sharp tap would have done; my skull, weathered by long exposure to Hackney's microclimate, is hard as a cycle helmet. But I assembled enough of the tiny pieces to establish that the weapon was not organic. No straw-nested bullet from a farmers' market. The viscous slime that ran down my collar wasn't brain matter, just past-its-sell-by yolk.

Next day I uncovered the background of this apparently meaningless event. The gang were car-jackers who pelted vehicles, while they made their rat runs down Albion Drive, with eggs. Windscreens were smeared as drivers slowed for the first in the chain of sleeping policemen. Motorists would be tempted to give chase, while a quick-handed lad, at the blind side, reached inside to snatch the radio, mobile phone or disability disc. It was my bad luck to chance along at the end of a flat day. These scams have a limited life. It's pretty tough being a villain in Hackney. There's too much competition. But the lightbulb moment of the egg on the head was valuable. I knew then, blood and soap and albumen, that it was time to start thinking about the territory where my life had formed and unravelled. It wouldn't be around much longer.

And one more thing: as I lifted my head, after the blow, I noticed an owl fluffing out its feathers in the cracked window of a derelict house that nobody had any good reason, as yet, to demolish.

## *This Property*

April 2007. You have to start somewhere.

Anna.

In bed. Launching into *Winter in Madrid* by C. J. Sansom. She says she hates it when books open with dates, because you have to remember them, remember where you are. The place, the period. I'm reading Stewart Home, *Memphis Underground*. It's one of those slender Jiffy-bag paperbacks that contain much more than their physical dimensions seem to promise. I recognize a few of the riffs, about Arthur Machen, mystical geometries, pathways out of London. I think I wrote them, but I can't be sure. In Home everything spirals back on itself in a pathological accounting of bands, books, names, streets. An obsessive reworking of episodes at which I was present, but which I failed to copyright. And even if I did write it, who cares, as the manic Home slashes, grabs, mugs his way through the canon. He has grasped the key mode of contemporary art, theft. Repetition. Keeping on saying it until somebody pays you some attention. Only the familiar is familiar.

I have been working on a Hackney book for a while now, heaping up insane quantities of material, logging interviews without number: forty years. And I haven't achieved the starting point, that impossible first sentence. The guiding principle was a quote from William Blake: 'Tho' obscured, this is the form of the Angelic land.' The first words of Home's novel. I should have stopped there.

*Hackney*: a carriage or coach for hire, cab; employed, or done for hire; to make trite, common, or stale by frequent use.

*Hackney*(slang): a prostitute; a pimp; a run-of-the-mill horse.

One afternoon Stewart shocked me by arriving on my doorstep without his bicycle. He had come to record his memories of crack

houses, squats, co-operatives. He had recently lost an excellent perch on the Golden Lane Estate in the Barbican. Hackney, we agreed, is property. That is all it's about, mortgages, debt-management. The cost of being where you are. Home's entire catalogue, when you come down to it, dozens of frantic compositions made in the teeth of the storm, concerns eviction. Mess up with current woman, on your bike. A borrowed couch, a floor, whisky talk: new novel (new debts). He circles the sprawling borough, its hot nuclear core. But Hackney is an old suburb, a refuge – which is precisely what Home is fleeing: the idea of suburbia as exile, divorce from the action. A hide of surrogate or actual parents.

In this new book, new today, 25 April 2007, Home has pasted the property interview he gave me into his published text – before I've even had time to transcribe it. He sweeps across the geography of London, on foot, bicycle abandoned as part of the Golden Lane eviction; speeding from publisher to independent film-maker, patron to website interview, Hoxton to Shoreditch, Brick Lane.

'Mare Street had changed. It had become trendy since I'd first started visiting it regularly as a callow youth of sixteen for various parties against racism,' he said.

The Mare Street riff is a standard in Hackney reportage. Dr David Widgery, on the bus, heading south towards his Limehouse practice: mass-observing, listening, transcribing. 'Rain pelting down. The road at a standstill through sheer weight of traffic; ill-tempered cars, double-banked buses and grinding HGVs. People dart dangerously between vehicles, building workers jack-in-a-box out of Transits, mothers weave buggies between revving Cortinas. The terracotta muse high above the roof of the Hackney Empire waves people to work.' Social realism works through an accumulation of gritty detail, the drumbeat of fast-moving lists.

The forgotten post-war novelist, Roland Camberton, published *Rain on the Pavements* – with a high-angle Mare Street long shot by John Minton on its dustwrapper – in 1951. Before vanishing and never being heard from again. But these were engaged and passionate writers, absorbed in the crowd; Widgery's jazzy, Beat-

inflected prose, Camberton's mocking humour. John Minton's trade unionists march onward with their unreadable banner, protesting against impossibly yellow weather.

Home has no time for local picaresque, scene setting, he has an appointment to keep at the Homerton Hospital. A man in a coma: Mick Cohen, underground film-maker. There are a lot of those in Hackney, no shortage of Cohens. The Spitalfields interview was for a film about gentrification. The woman with whom Stewart shares hummus salad in pita bread has just returned from an arts conference where a lot of people had been talking about how rising property prices were making it impossible for them to pursue their cultural practice in London.

I have years of interviews with Hackney dwellers, one tape leading to another, story within a story, and they're all, these talkers, self-confessed artists. Even the doctors, surgeons, barbers, bus drivers: they have their hobbies, collections of Matchbox Toys from the Lesney Factory on the edge of the marshes, gigs at the Royal College of Art. The would-be-writers, future painters, uncommissioned film-makers are the worst; they want to rehearse their proposals, to record hours of anecdotes from books that will never be completed. Or started. Unless I can be persuaded to promote them, talk them up, send them to eager publishers.

The archive itself is now a property. Images are property. History isn't the province of memory-men, it belongs to speculators, anal retentives smart enough not to throw away their rubbish. Rubbish and property: twinned themes. Eco defaulters, those who refuse to compost, are the latest criminals. If you don't separate your tea bags from your plastic mineral-water bottles, you'll be prosecuted, fined, evicted. Early-morning streets are dressed with every shade of bucket and bin, stacked with nearly new white goods, vacuum cleaners, CDs in cellophane, computers, lavatory bowls that nobody wants. This is not property, this is the antimatter of a virtual world subject to hourly revision. The flotsam and tidewrack of cyberspace. Scavengers have abandoned the skips of our neat inner-city villages, the steady gaze of the energy police, for the

deregulated wastelands of the emerging Olympic Park. They're all out there, with bicycles, handcarts, vans, with pliers, bolt-cutters and knives, asset-stripping ruins, peeling electricity cables, getting the price of a drink together. So that they can settle on a companionable bench, with a view of water, to smoke and chug in ruminative silence. Absorbed in the landscape they occupy, pilgrims and sadhus of the immediate. The ordinary. The last self-funding, self-motivating human machines in the borough. Lost ones on their first days to heaven.

Hackney, I decided, would be a story of money and cars. Two subjects about which I knew absolutely nothing. A great beginning. I had a title, *Black Teeth*, and a plan: unity of time and place, one weekend fending off a debt crisis against threats of bailiffs and summary violence. But that was too mundane, too close to fiction.

'Lit-fic's a dead duck,' my editor said. 'Carry on with the same book but pepper it with real names, actual locations. The London heritage stuff still plays. We'll squeeze you into the travel sections.'

So what about *Life and Debt on the Eastern Front*? Too Russian. *The Empire of Hackney: Its fallen rise*. Too cleverdick. Nobody reads Gibbon. The title will look after itself, concentrate on that first line. First chapter. First section. Like building an upside-down pyramid, it all starts with a single brick.

'I want to combine popular story telling, poetics and critique. I am Death. I am Undead. I stopped living. Ad nauseam.'

That's how Stewart Home finishes.

## *Down from Highgate thro' Hackney*

Stepping out, the spread of the town enhanced by failing vision, the novelty of a remote white-ribbed King's Cross development: Highgate. The lengthy down escalator of the hill, its refracted wealth. Walk it and you are part of it: private schools for private money, Whittington's black cat, Andrew Marvell's hole in the wall. Anna, in her dreams, would live here. Up above the swamp. On summer heights where our lost Hackney Brook once rose.

Remember those Saturdays? The period when Anna was pictured in a coffee-table book, *Flea Markets in Europe*; long hair pinned back, collar up, blue coat with military epaulettes from a pine-stripping place on Balls Pond Road? She was presiding over my Camden Passage stall. A flat table of used books. Striking young woman, young mother, catching the photographer's eye. No easy thing, stolen images in street markets. *Sawdust Caesar*: a book about Mussolini. A biography of Jan Christiaan Smuts. Remnants of my father's library? Was he already dead? Or had I bought, for resale, titles I recognized from my childhood? While Anna took her day in the market, I came with the children to Waterlow Park. Squirrels, then a novelty, ran up my legs to perch on my shoulders before leaping away downhill to invade the rest of London. Karl Marx: I marched the children over to see the great hieratic head, the black paperweight holding down so many tracts. A plot in Highgate Cemetery was the only way fortunate Hackney writers, with good connections, were ever going to migrate up here.

I had located, on Highgate Hill, a furniture shop heaped with German literature; an obviously Jewish collection, pristine in dust-wrappers. Kafka. Canetti. Hermann Broch. Alfred Döblin's *Berlin Alexanderplatz*. The difficulty being that the shop, by next week, might be gone. Time was pressing, Anna to be collected, car loaded,

cherry bakewell treats bought at a corner shop on the way home to Hackney. I scanned the books, fast, leaving four-year-old William in the car with his older sister. At least he didn't drive it away. He set the windscreen-wipers going, scraping cones of smear, so that they couldn't be stopped. As our agitated family party juddered back down to Islington. Market traders with a capital fund of about fifty pounds. But without debts or mortgages. In the city, in our own house. Metal steps descending to a cat-napping, Henri Rousseau garden of vegetables and cannabis plants.

A slight ache.

Which was becoming more pronounced with every step closer to Archway. Black suede-type slipper shoes. A special offer that was not so special. Pain exists to be walked through – *but what if you can't walk?* One problem was settled for now: the teeth. Nothing headline generating, by way of cost, light tinkering, a month's worth of old money. The dentist, tall and Scandinavian, has an interest in art, London's heritage. It's up there on the wall, Turner splashes to take your mind off the smoking drill. I find myself thinking of another Highgate exile with a bad mouth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Who was stalked by a man hired to keep him away from the apothecary. Arbitrary jump cuts of consciousness as I sprawl on this plastic-sheathed airline chair and the oral-mechanic probes for an icicle nerve. Coleridge and Wordsworth. Family holidays in the west. 'Quantock ridge in smudge of sun.'

I am looking forward to the walk home. A free afternoon. No meetings, no students, nothing overdue: apart from the Hackney book. Which is more of a way of life than a serious project. My children have left home. I can enjoy the liberty of the city: accidental encounters, fresh discoveries. No cash in my pocket, nothing to tempt me into junkshops or cafés. There is a cheque to pay in, an insignificant amount but useful. A small credit to reverse the flow of standing orders, surcharges, council threats. I've carried the cheque around for a week, on random London diagonals, without coming across an operative HSBC bank.

When you notice the fact that one step is made after another,

you're in trouble. Zephyrs of diesel grit. Drifting bands of batter-waft: frying onions, burgers. But no filling stations, those green-shaded pagodas have gone, not economic. More use as development sites. No HSBC banks either. *Is the cheque still there?* At the last count thirteen payments were outstanding; the chaff of journalism, talks delivered months ago to colleges where the mass of required forms far outweighs the script for the lecture. It takes an afternoon to prepare your material and a week to figure out the online invoice requirements. Calling yourself 'freelance' is a confession of penury. The new universities take the 'free' part too literally. Writers without tenure are public beggars.

Plenty of money-transfer activity on Holloway Road. They'll take your cash and send it on holiday, anywhere in the globe. Hole-in-the-wall fiscal laundrettes. Sirens and shakedown. Collisions. Power walkers sweep passed as I make the error of looking at things, recalling previous incidents, journeys.

By Highbury Corner, the pain has progressed from ankle to calf. Air thickens and early pollen makes my eyes water. Tomorrow will clear or confirm this condition: as a problem. Mouth fixed, leg shot. Walter Sickert ran a painting school on Highbury Place. Write that down, it might be useful. Blue plaques are the Islington equivalent of Hackney's Sky satellite dishes.

With my leg gone, I had no choice but to excavate my bicycle. When I worked as a labourer, packing cigars in Clerkenwell, I cycled. The bike cost £6 in Kingsland Waste Market. I wobbled around the notorious Old Street roundabout without damage. I cycled down Homerton High Street, past the Lesney Matchbox Toys Factory, on to the Marshes, when I had the task of painting white lines for the football pitches. At an era when the canal path was overgrown and forbidden, I peddled to Limehouse, through Victoria Park, down Grove Road and Burdett Road, to work as a gardener. The sharp-saddled bicycle was a collaborator in any reading of the city. Territory crossed and crisscrossed: burial grounds and back rivers explored.

It was too late in life to mount up again; a terrible reversion, the penultimate stage before the electrified buggy, the golf cart of the incapacitated, waiting for a ramp to descend from the special-needs bus. Both tyres were flat, the gears didn't work: the yellow wreck supported me like a Limerick drunk as I hobbled towards Mare Street, London Fields Cycles. In the old days, the never-were days, you could take in a bike smarting from its latest catastrophe: no problem, small cash transaction, straight back on the road. Now it's like seeing an overworked oncologist, you make an appointment. This is a borough where cycling is close to compulsory; yellow-tabard squads set up checkpoints on London Fields or by the canal gate at Cat and Mutton Bridge. To harass and advise. To offer nutty cakes and green apples. To share your sorrow at the absence of a working bell.

*Ting ting.*

Best practice. Fit for purpose. Take home a leaflet.

cyclists should slow down, ring with **two tings** and let other users through the bridge before continuing. never pass a pedestrian or another cyclist underneath a bridge. the waterways and towpaths have many historic structures and important wildlife habitats. the regent's canal has been designated a site of metropolitan importance.

There is a three-month waiting list before you can book your bike in for a check-up. The cycle health service is in crisis. And don't imagine you can breeze into the surgery one afternoon with anything as trivial as a buckled wheel. They have a rigid system: the first six patients, chosen from an orderly queue, out on the street, will be admitted at 8 a.m. To receive a ticket and to wait while basic treatment is given. No point in hanging about checking the alternatives, new bikes kick in at around £250 for a basic model. They have cycling maps, but not of this area. They have an array of gaudy-tough helmets like laminated skulls. They have everything

in fluorescent yellows and greens, psychotropic decay, vampire mouth scarlet, fairground gothic.

I arrive, second in line, at half-seven. I have to get away sharpish, Renchi is dropping in at Albion Drive for a cup of fruit tea. Renchi Bicknell of Glastonbury, with Vanessa, his wife and partner in a B&B operation. There is a significance about the times when Renchi manifests in the city. We walked the acoustic footprints of the M25; he, coming from outside the motorway, to meet me, pushing out from the centre. Whatever emerged from those excursions was a proof of difference, a sympathetic dialogue between separated worlds. It was Renchi who brought me here in the first place: 1968. A communal house in De Beauvoir Road. His sisters had already staked out parts of Islington and this raid, across Southgate Road, a boundary, was a demonstration of the way inherited capital flows east. Six of us in an area that was unknown, coming together after Dublin, from West and North London. I was the only one who had lived, twice, south of the river. Now here was Renchi, returned, prompting me to get this bicycle surgery done as quickly as possible.

Southgate Road: 1907. The year of Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent*. Special Branch liaising with the Tsar's secret police. Watchmen at Liverpool Street Station waiting for the Harwich train. The Georgian bandit, Soso Djughashvili, also known as Joseph Stalin, was expected for the Fifth Congress of the Russian Social-Democratic Workers Party. To be held at the Revd Swann's Brotherhood Church, Southgate Road. Lenin. Trotsky.

Stalin and Maksim Litvinov kipped in Fieldgate Street, Whitechapel, in Jack London's 'Monster Doss House'. The twin towers of Tower House. Eileen, in the pub next door (once a synagogue, now an upmarket curry franchise), opened a biscuit tin and showed me the nicotine-yellow, friable cuttings. Subversives. Agitators. Political exiles. They slip across the border. Then as now.

2007: public conveniences, generously provided in the civic confidence of the imperialist era, are being restored. *Ting ting*. The Gents in Stamford Hill, so locals report, is occupied, nightly, by Polish builders.

RUSSIAN REVOLUTIONISTS AFRAID OF THE CAMERA.

Block headline. *Daily Mirror*, 1907. Southgate Road. Procession of men in bourgeois-workers' funeral outfits, umbrellas, removed bowlers disguising beards. Iron railings. Lumpy ecclesiastical bricks. Churches like prisons. Journalists are spooks, double agents, narks. Pigment is metaphor: blood red. *Not til the red fog rises*. Afraid of the camera's cyclopean eye, as they walk heads bowed towards it. Fifth Congress. Third World. *The Sign of Four*.

Astrid Proll, driver for the Red Army Faction, that countercultural eruption of the late 1960s, on the run, escaping from the suicide fate of her colleagues in Stammheim's futurist prison, was somewhere in London. Half-forgotten: not by the watchers, the bill posters, the graffiti polemicists.

FREE ASTRID PROLL. Underneath the Westway. Noticed by a German cameraman, Martin Schäfer, Wim Wenders associate, working on Chris Petit's English road film, *Radio On*. Proll is a presence, an absence around which a number of contradictory myths accumulate. She was arrested, while training young black offenders as motor mechanics, in a West Hampstead garage. She had marched into the local cop shop to register a protest on behalf of one of her charges. Celebrity mug shot. Lightbulb of recognition. After Paddington Green, then HMP Brixton, a return to Germany. On her release, Proll trained in film, Hamburg. She published her Paris snapshots, Baader-Meinhof on holiday. Cafés, mirrors. Ricard ashtrays. She edited a scrapbook of archival friezes, late history. And introduced it as: 'pictures of dead people'. The key sentence jumps out: *We were afraid of photographs*.

Hackney is this: cameras and bicycles. On thin balconies of recent flats. Chained to fences. In the windows of council front-operations, TfL promotions. Sponsorship of bicycles and cameras. The folded maps in the London Fields cycle shop, highlighting

cycle paths, are free: propaganda. They demonstrate how territory can be invaded by any determined special-interest group and how all maps are political, they are about *not* telling. Giving users just enough rope to hang themselves. *Ting ting.*

There's a man, number eight in the queue, with a young child, a girl, in his arms – and they're telling him he'll have to go away, try again tomorrow. Which he simply cannot understand. 'Well,' he says, 'well well, but . . . can I leave the machine?'

'Sorry. First five, every morning, that's it.'

There is a notice in the window: 'Eight O Clock Drop. We will only do punctures, cables and brake blocks. One item per customer. We will be operating a "no leave" policy.' *Ting.*

'I had to get over here, before work, bring my daughter, from Kentish Town, before nursery. It's a difficult drive.'

They're sympathetic, the fit young mechanics, the women in dungarees, but there is nothing they can do. There has to be a system or it would be chaos, punctures leaking, wrecks everywhere like a Shoreditch art installation. Please help yourself to a complimentary plan of Canary Wharf. *Unlock the history of London's river. English Partnerships at Greenwich Peninsula Investing in the 21st Century.*

'If you can't find the map you want, there's a website. You can order from there.'

I'm lucky, my puncture will be treated immediately. I have half an hour to kill in the council zone, the official centre of governance for Hackney. If I can't walk, I can limp and learn. Street frontage, south of the Town Hall, is non-commercial, wide-windowed: walk-through fast food (access to library), HSBC bank, cycle surgery, and various job-seeking arcades with machines that print out employment possibilities, on a daily basis. You have to shop for a parking space, purchasing books of tickets like a raffle or a lottery scratchcard. All the paperwork aspires to the condition of an environment-improving gamble, an investment, blank cheque in the future. Colour-coded hard plastic chairs. Near-artworks,

digital images, that key up the best of the borough. Calendar illustrations of Hackney Marshes, Springfield Park, London Fields. Urban pastoral. The green lungs that kept the lowlife fit for smoking, their sixty-a-day habits. And here too, in case your experience of the real thing is overwhelming, is a large colour print of the Hackney Empire: the sheer cliff of that much loved, much restored old music hall. The rose-red endstop of the Town Hall precinct. With its vast lettering: HACKNEY EMPIRE. An East German memory-prompt banished to a sculpture park after the Wall came down: present and loud and stripped of meaning.

The council are going to splash out – credit rich at last, slush funds kicking in – on new premises in keeping with their burnished status. That's what regeneration is really about, fancier council offices. But the white block, sharp-angled 1934 Town Hall, with its balcony and flags, is a civic boast of some substance. You could do a Mussolini, an Oswald Mosley, up there, stiff left arm resting on parapet. Broad steps – seven, then five more – separate the building and its secure entrance from the street. An impression amplified by the formal garden, behind the lively bus stop. The war memorial has been restored. There are palm trees. Sometimes a high police horse tosses its head in front of the south wall of the theatre.

Active council functionaries come and go, they meet and greet, gabbling into mouthpieces and cellphones. Today they are, for the most part, black. It's impertinent and probably illegal to remark on the fact. Or to notice, with anything more than vulgar curiosity, a register of social change: that by afternoon all the voices along the Regent's Canal between Queensbridge Road and Victoria Park are Russian, French, Italian, German. I've seen Poles so drunk they are making cocktails from the dregs of bottles left in bins that haven't been emptied for weeks. You can't say this. Or even think it, although I do: there is something stirring about a white building under black occupation. Like the presidential palace of an African state that has been destroyed by waves of colonialism; first plunder, then conspicuous charity. But this monoculturalism is an illusion,

Hasidic men pass down the marble hall to register births. There are numerous traces, among council clients, of old Jewish Hackney. Of all Hackneys. Including the false memory of a photograph I took, 35mm black and white, of Renchi Bicknell in a pinstripe suit, white socks, bounding across these steps: to be married for the first time. 1969? A ceremony I must have witnessed. I do remember the conclusion of the day, driving to Cambridge, warm afternoon, my cheap fawn suit. Like a terrible anticipatory homage to Ken Livingstone.

I cycle home across London Fields, sticking to the allocated green track (until it vanishes). I bump into a neighbour who throws me by asking, with some hesitation, if I could supply her with a poem about the future. She is doing the post round. It's that hour of the day: when householders redistribute wrongly delivered packages. If correspondence arrives in the right street, or within half a mile of it, temporary postmen reckon the job's done. It seems discourteous to point out minor errors. The situation has improved of late. I haven't noticed any grey sacks floating in the canal or found bundles of opened envelopes behind our hedge. Some of the posties stick with this miserable round for at least a fortnight.

I comb through notebooks, things published and unpublished, but I can't find a single poem that touches on the future. Everything is resolutely nudged by the now, under the drag of an invented past. I'm sorry, Harriet, I have no idea what the future holds. Or what it is. The architect Erich Mendelsohn, who was responsible for the De La Warr Pavilion in Bexhill-on-Sea, said: 'Only he who cannot forget has no free mind.' In Berlin they labour to exorcize the past. In Hackney we must train ourselves to exorcize the future.