

OPEN YOUR PALM, FEEL THE DUST SETTLING THERE

Wormwood Scrubs. Even the name is tangled, a patchouli scent of undergrowth and dirt. This was the edge of the city once, a zone of asylums and infirmaries.

Du Cane road. I know the name, the mythology surrounding Harry Roberts. They used to sing it at the football, send chills through the coppers there. I wonder where it happened, certain I can feel the repercussions, a charge of vexed energy. It seems a long way, the terrain is stretching, buildings flung apart. I haven't been around here for years.

Hammersmith Hospital. Crowded foyer, hubs of activity, Costa, Sodexo, Subway.

I look at the instructions again. A smell of disinfectant and rubber. The ward is upstairs, you have to buzz in. They don't check who I am. I think about security, the lack of it, how I could be anyone.

I walk past three bays, three enclosures with identical beds and grey curtains.

There are figures, shapes under blankets.

Low murmurs, Womans Own strewn across chairs.

I turn a corner and see her son and daughter, they're both there at the foot of the bed. They look pleased to see me. I suppose I'm a distraction, a break in the tension.

It's a shock seeing her like that, at odd angles as if she's been flung there. It doesn't seem right that she's here, our conversations have always revolved around Edgware Road where she's lived for seventy years, and Yorkshire where she was born. Those were our co-ordinates. I don't want her to spend her last days here.

The ward is insulated, there are no windows facing out, just a white glare from the strip lights, the linoleum floors. Her face, the penetrating look of it, is concealed, pressed beneath one I barely recognise. Her mouth is reduced a diagonal line. And I realise I've never seen her without a shampoo and set, this new hair is electrical, tufts of it lifting from her scalp.

Her eyes are shut but she knows I'm here. I talk to her like I always do, about the old places, the terrain we shared. I list them. Praed Street, Boscobel Street, the cafe on the market. Her eyes open, she smiles, a deep beam coming from that continent of memories, that ocean beneath. Her green eyes, for a second, are lamps signalling from there.

At regular intervals her daughter goes to the car park to put money in the meter, the hospital is run by Sodexo, they fine you if you don't top up, even at a time like this. And it's always a time like this for someone. The meter keeps ticking, they send their letters automatically, there's never anyone to plead with, use your charm on. Kay's my friend. We've got a connection, we'd both left Yorkshire for London, fifty years apart. Her hand feels smooth and hot as I hold it. Her face is fading, as if I'm looking at a drawing, just lines etched on to paper, nothing coloured in. But her spirit is still here, she's still fighting.

I walk through a brick arch into the car park. The prison is there transmitting Victorian darkness, brutal order. Now it's unravelling in overcrowding and squalor. Today it was on the news again, an inmate stabbed to death by four others, 90 attacks in six months. You can hear them. Tormented shouts from deep inside the prison, the smell of weed drifting over the walls. And that other smell, stale and septic, hard to describe. Of decay, something off, something bodily, an unclean wound.

It's haunting, hearing them like that. On lockdown, calling through cell windows, waiting for answers to come back from the walls. I listen for him. You can tell so much by listening, images form in my mind. I know what they look like suddenly, I know who they are. I look up at those high brick walls and wonder if he's there behind them. I tell myself it's impossible. I would know. I'd have a sense of it. He's had to flee, that's the version I have to tell myself.

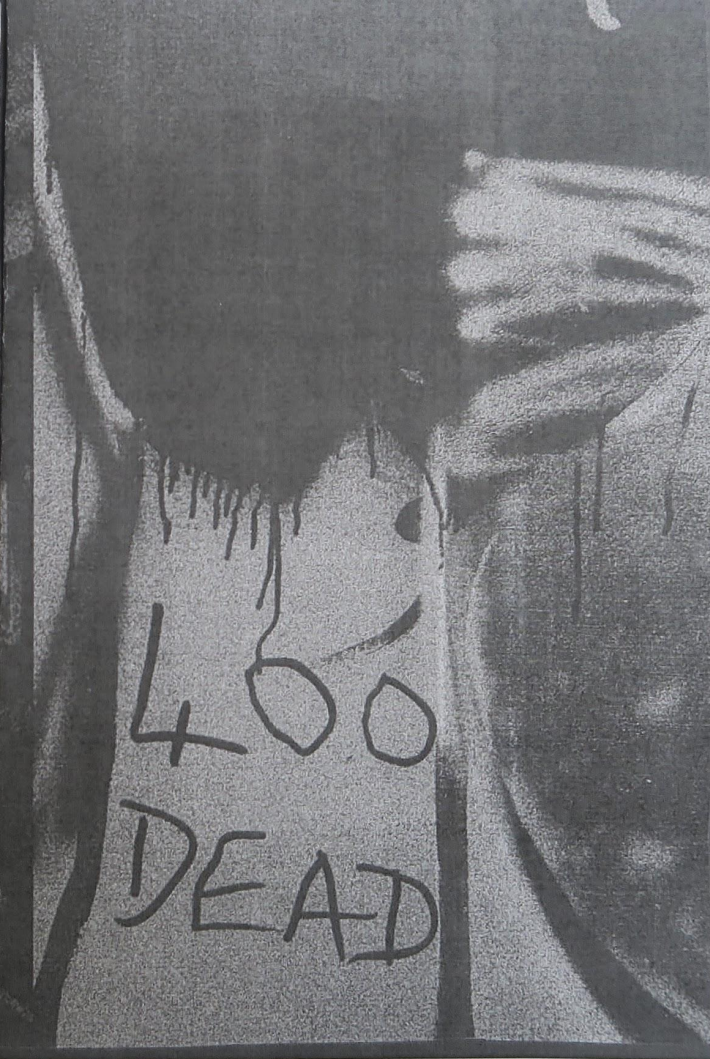
But somehow I know he's alive, the thought is resilient, unalterable. I would know if it was otherwise. The knowledge would come like an explosion, a collision wrapping me in it, it would fell me. Until then there's hope.

How many of them had been there that night, how many of them illegal, evading someone. Ever since i'd met him, all those years ago it had been fugitive like that, none of us using our names, hiding our identities, not from each other but as an allegiance, a form of protection. He'd only ever known my first name, it was all I went by, and that was all I knew of him. We found each other through bar rooms, telephone boxes, notes pushed through doors. That's how he'd find me again.

I can still smell the smoke. I know he's circling, waiting for the right moment.

Turning back towards White city, I see the shell of that tower, I can't avoid it. Until now I'd refused to look, I couldn't bear to see it, not even on tv. Now it's at the centre of my vision, rising over the Westway, a symbol of everything that's gone wrong. I can't let the thoughts settle, the possibilities held there; he must be out of range, on the continent maybe.

There are photos tacked to the walls, the trees. Faded now under laminate, under plastic bags, faces blotched in the rain, colours seeping as if they were drowned. I think I recognise some of them. They're missing like he's missing. The separation has been forced, riven like a gully, a deep furrow through the centre. There can be no balance now, no equilibrium, I'm split in half like a tree in a storm.



400
DEAD

As the terrain becomes febrile, I think of him more, sense the restless searching. There are traces, little scratches in soft brick, chalk marks on concrete stanchions. They hadn't disappeared, not altogether. The markings are visible if you know where to look.

I retrace our steps. The cavernous Westfeld with its echoey, saccharine pop is the first place I go. Some of the crew had worked in here once, in kitchens and bars.

The music coalesces, crystals permeating the space around me. I hear this song all the time. I recognise the voice, corralling the forces, distilling it all into this moment. It gauges the terrain, a conduit into the collective psyche, the euphoria of the first days spring and the anguish residing beneath. The track echoes, reverberates through bright atria.

Las Iguanas. I stop here, it's the kind of place I would go with him for an afternoon drink, that sense of exhilaration we used to get from truancy, from hiding out. He looked different every time, a new guise, a different face, that's why I can't fix an image of him now. We were careful, we didn't have smartphones, nothing that could track or capture.

It was the kind of place we mocked but secretly liked, pendant lights, luminous cocktails, happy hour. We'd have a couple then go on long rambling drifts bouyed up on rum and sugar.



I walk back through the shopping centre to White city, that traffic snarl round the old BBC where I always lose my way. This was his territory not mine, the lines of it lacerated him, connected his nerves, his tissue. Grand Union Canal, The Westway, Hammersmith and City. He bore the traces on his skin like accidental tattoos.

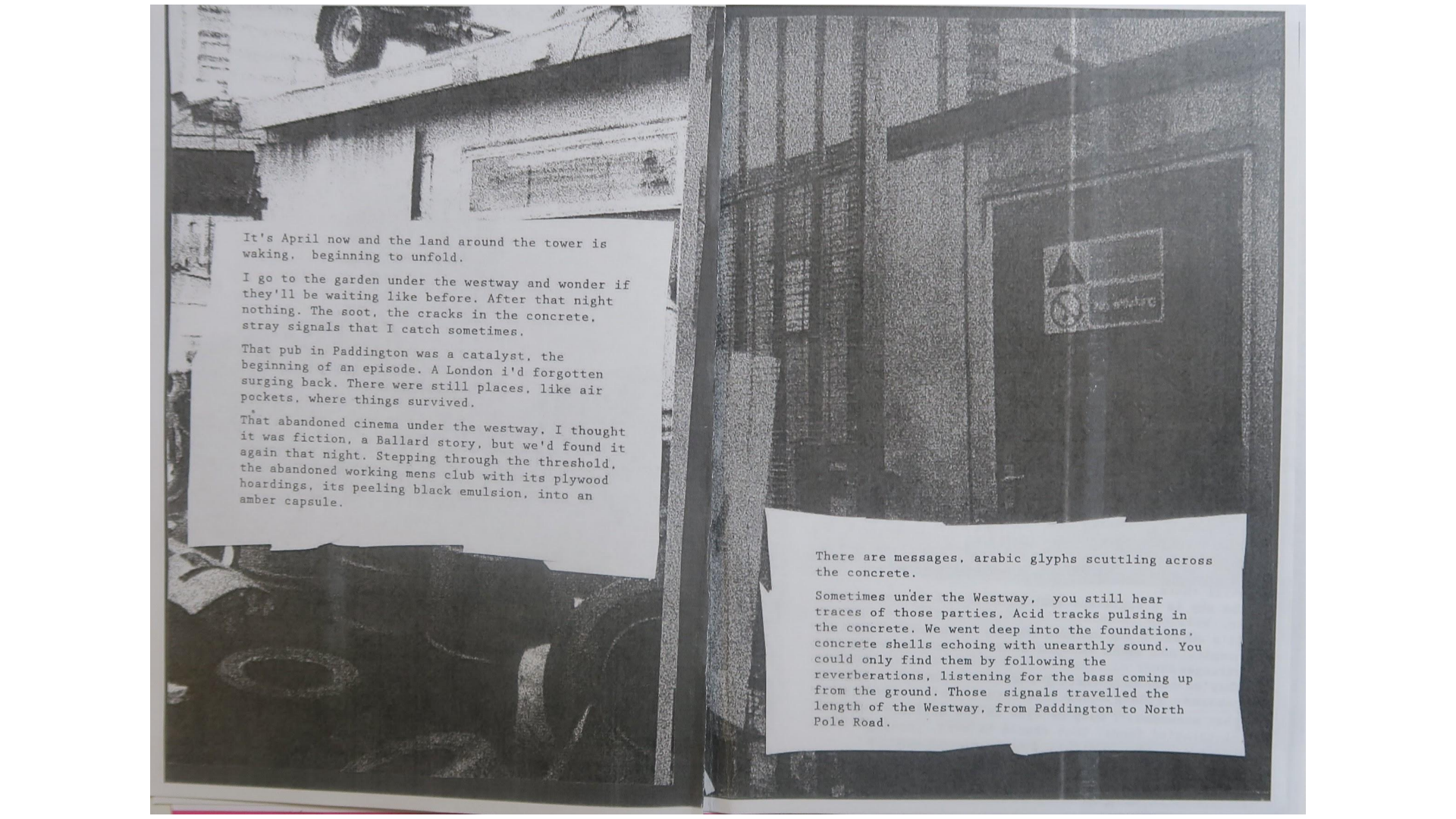
I think of the raids, flats getting busted before the Carnival. They were damned if they were going to let it go up. Arrests, spurious charges, then curfews and bans, a kind of spatial discipline. I'd seen those strangers in meetings saying politics was a hijack, a lack of respect. I remember them telling us to stay silent.

They came to our flat, the one off Church street, we were expecting them. Demoralised police, weak government, they were getting skittish.

Now, with my mojito, solitary in a corner with fizzing music and bored waiters an image of his face is gradually forming. It's from last September, he'd just had his hair cut, I remember his face in the neon, his eyes big and glassy, as if he was seeing too much, as if it was spilling out. It only lasted a few seconds.

A security guard walks past. It's time to leave, I thought it might yield something, a clue or a sign, but I need to walk to find those, this place is too sanitised, too quickly overturned. Back there though, in the service tunnels, in the loading bays, there could be something, someone who might know. The way that guard looked at me was different, not the usual absent minded surveillance, there was a hint of recognition. Or maybe I'm just imagining it, I imagine a lot now. I see a lot of things.





It's April now and the land around the tower is waking, beginning to unfold.

I go to the garden under the westway and wonder if they'll be waiting like before. After that night nothing. The soot, the cracks in the concrete, stray signals that I catch sometimes.

That pub in Paddington was a catalyst, the beginning of an episode. A London I'd forgotten surging back. There were still places, like air pockets, where things survived.

That abandoned cinema under the westway. I thought it was fiction, a Ballard story, but we'd found it again that night. Stepping through the threshold, the abandoned working mens club with its plywood hoardings, its peeling black emulsion, into an amber capsule.

There are messages, arabic glyphs scuttling across the concrete.

Sometimes under the Westway, you still hear traces of those parties, Acid tracks pulsing in the concrete. We went deep into the foundations, concrete shells echoing with unearthly sound. You could only find them by following the reverberations, listening for the bass coming up from the ground. Those signals travelled the length of the Westway, from Paddington to North Pole Road.

I remember when I first visited Kay in that tower block on Church street she proudly showed me the view across the city. We looked west from Wembley to the hazy acres of Wimbledon. You could follow the line of the Westway as it undulated, rising at Edgware road then swooping towards Paddington. I looked beyond it, to the Hallfield estate where he'd lived for a few weeks, then the tower blocks around Latimer Road. Kay asked me something about him once, probably on the first visit and I said nothing, even with her I was secretive.

She was like my Grandma, being with her was a way of making it up, compensating for lost time. With Kay I could turn back the clock, be a friend and companion the way I wished I'd been before.

We'd sit in a Moroccan cafe on Church street talking, watching the comings and goings, she never missed anything. The blokes in there looked after her, they respected her because she was old. She could have whatever she wanted, even if it wasn't on the menu, someone would go out onto the market and find it.

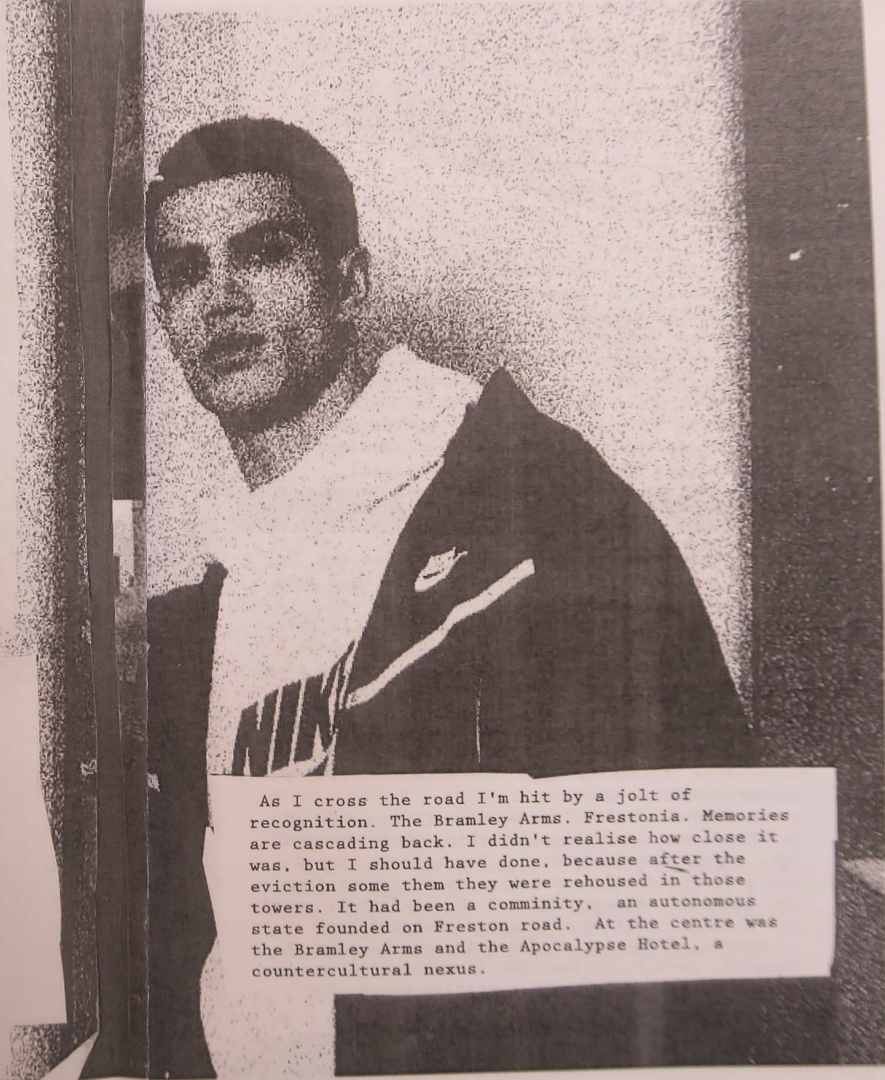
I thought they might know something, they might have seen him. There were connections, covert but perceptible. After the fire, the mood had switched. Some of them had lived there, they still knew people there.

I get off the tube at Latimer road. It's the first time since the fire i've been there. I don't lift my eyes, I stare at the the pavement. The tower is close, its presence palpable, the smell of carbon still there.

The sky is a brilliant mocking blue and I resent it.

It's quiet. I ask someone the way to Hammersmith hospital, he seems annoyed as if it marks me as a stranger.

They're sick of gawkers I know that, chancers with cameras circling round. I refuse to look at it, that monument. I keep my eyes on the notices, the photocopied faces. They should be here, pushing prams, calling in the newsagent, stopping for a pint of milk. Now their colours leach, efflorescences of bright ink.



As I cross the road I'm hit by a jolt of recognition. The Bramley Arms. Frestonia. Memories are cascading back. I didn't realise how close it was, but I should have done, because after the eviction some of them they were rehoused in those towers. It had been a community, an autonomous state founded on Freston road. At the centre was the Bramley Arms and the Apocalypse Hotel, a countercultural nexus.

Kay, we used to get taxis sometimes, short rides around the Borough. We'd stand on her balcony and point and say let's go there, it might be a new development going up or a building she was curious about. She wanted to name every landmark, every new tower as she surveyed her realm from the 18th floor.

The cab dropped us off outside the Bramley Arms, turned it into flats by then. There was a lot of building work going on, new apartments in muted red brick. These schemes represented a heritage version of London, an unreal, sanitised city. The brutalist blocks with their collective values had to be occluded, clad.

We were outside a new office block. I noticed the sign *Frestonia* and was shocked by the audacity. They were into this idea of placemaking, mining local archives for a micro-knowledge of the area. They were confident then that the militancy had been eradicated, that only fossils remained.

Kay stopped. I shouldn't have brought her out, it was too hot, she was looking pale. It's ok I said come in here. I pushed heavy glass doors and helped her into the large reception area, it was air conditioned, they had water coolers and soft chairs. She sat down, I went to get her a cup of water. A woman behind the desk with a helmet of blonde hair said *Can I help you?* Her face was drawn, stretched somehow, the forehead was smooth like plaster, I thought she must have had botox, a taut patch of leather above the eyebrows, like a conker, polished and smooth.

I remember the voice, the home counties sound of it. There was something disturbing about its tone, like a public announcement. She told us they'd get security guards and police to remove us from the premises. *Remove.* The way she said that, cold and flat as if we were objects, unwanted bags cluttering up space, or something worse, rats or insects, an infestation. She disappeared from view. The reception was momentarily empty. Kay

sipped the cold water. She said in a hoarse voice we should go. It's ok I said, only when you're able to. She sank back in the chair. I hadn't seen her look this weak before, her strength was dissipating, leaching like ectoplasm.

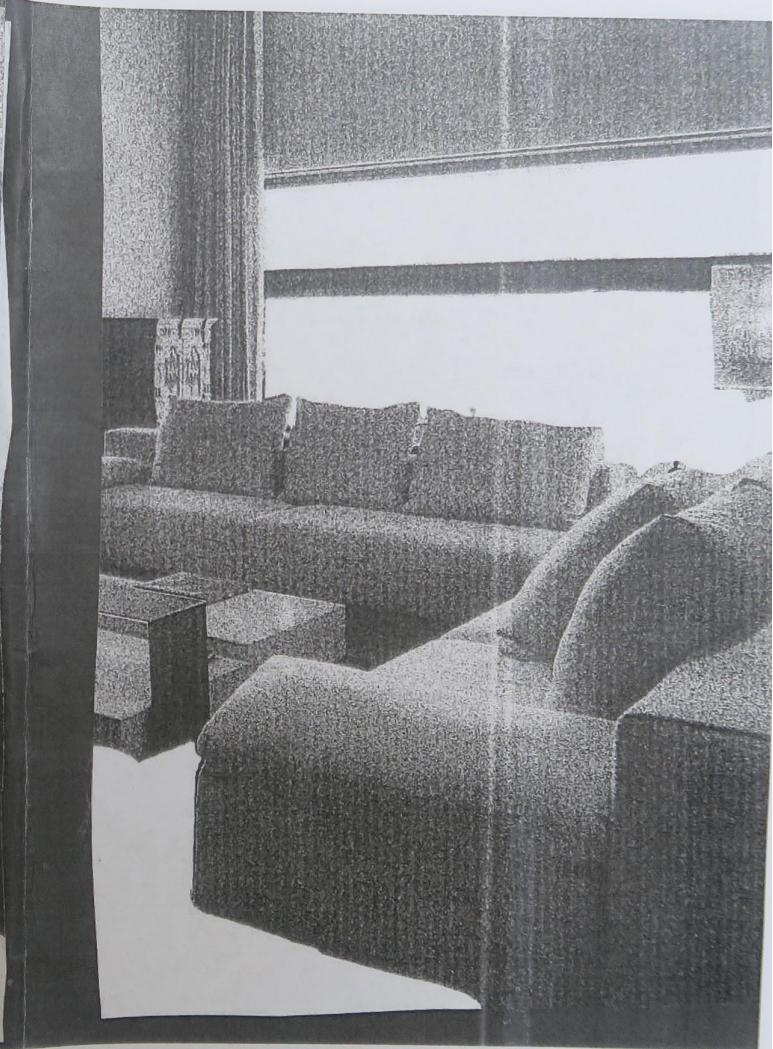
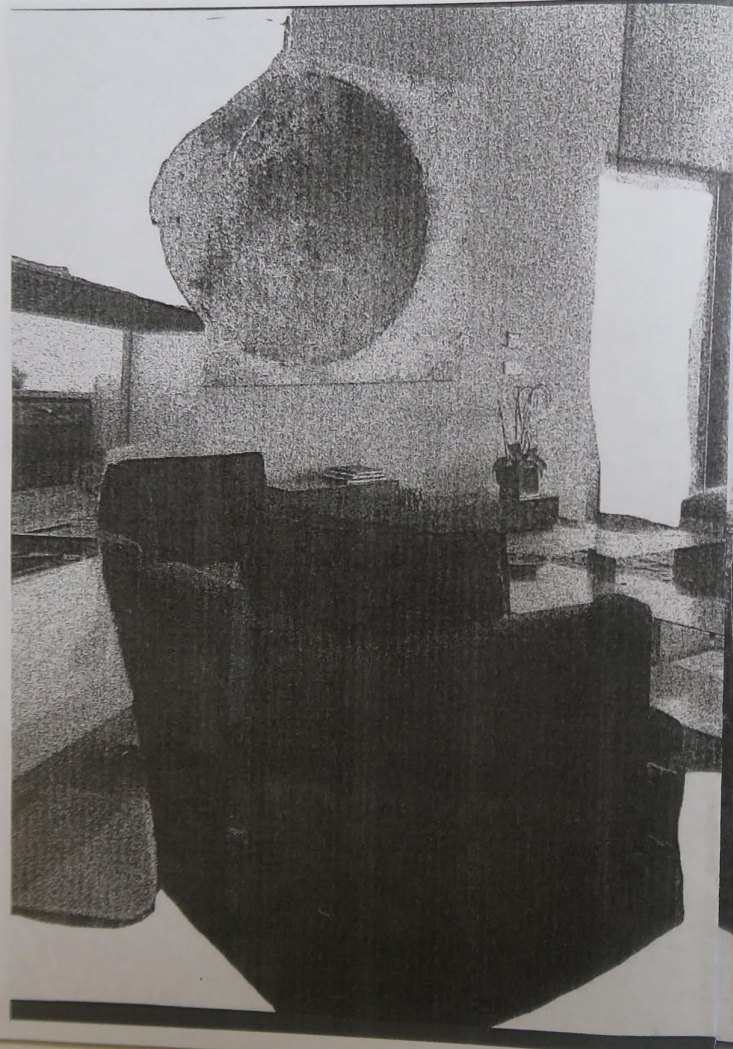
Then there were two others who looked the same, as if the receptionist had multiplied, replicated herself behind the scenes, three of them standing over us, telling us to leave. They were all wearing the same clothes, chintzy rose patterns, linen skirts. I recognised the company HQ, a vexed evocation of England, an England of cream teas and cricket pavillions.

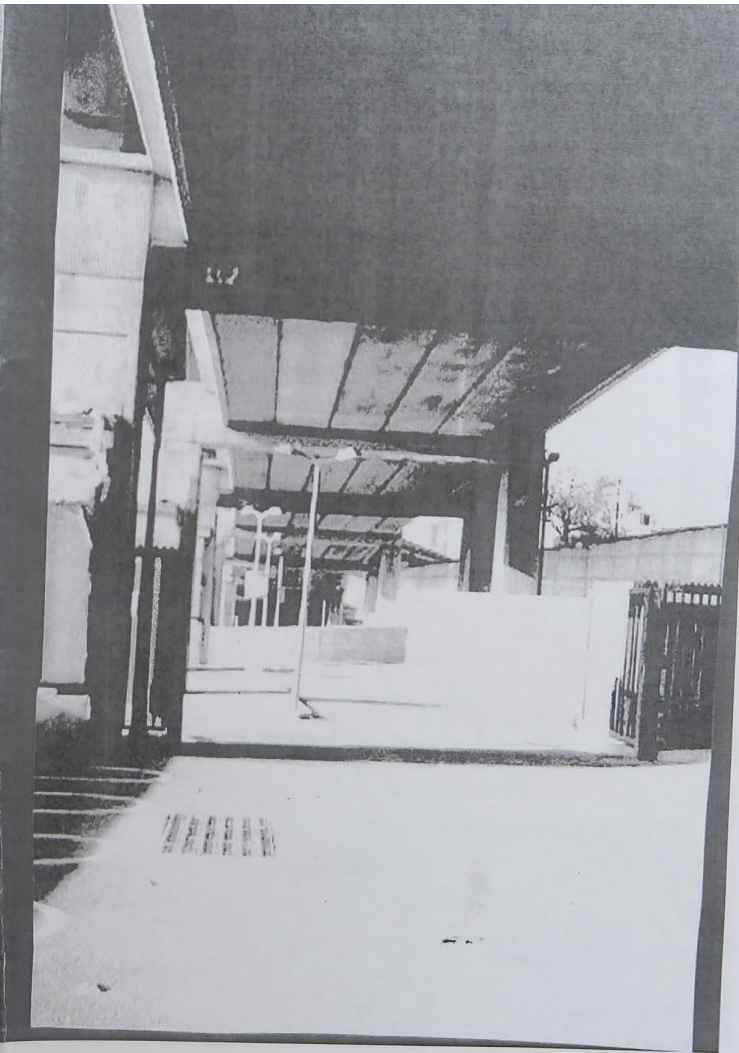
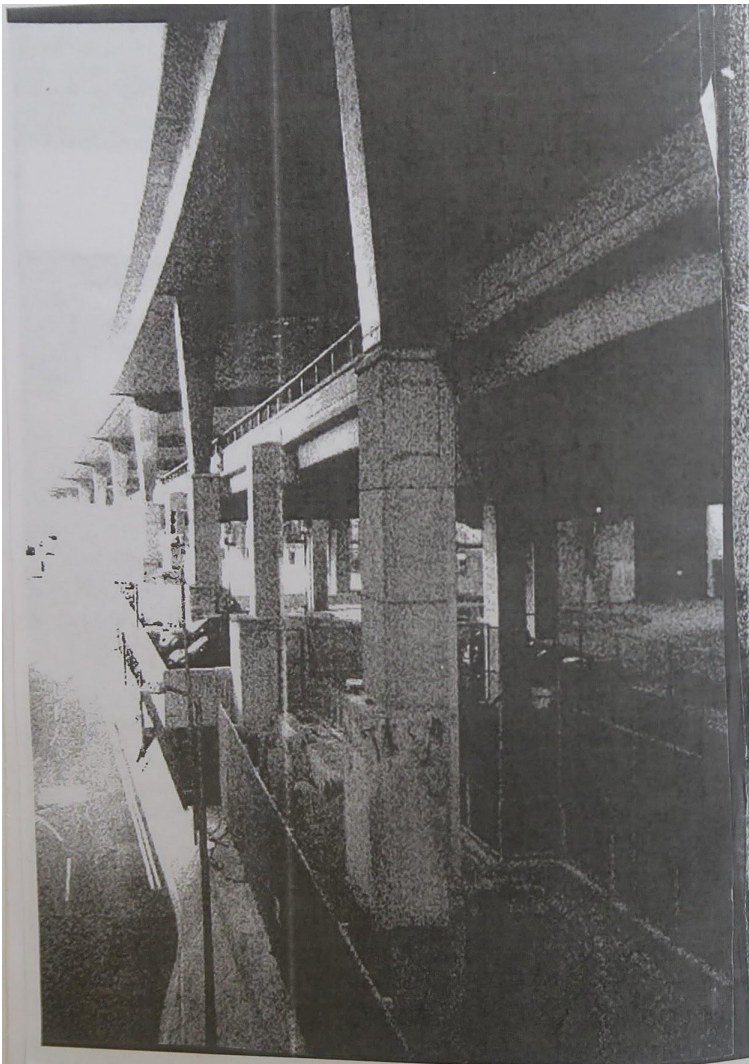
The women were brash Katie Hopkins types. I realised, now we were face to face, how much they despised us. The collision wouldn't have happened before, now it happened all the time. They've colonised this postcode, they think they own it, demanding bye laws and legislation to keep us out. At this time the tower hadn't been clad, it was brutal and raw, and they despised it, it was them who were clamouring for the cladding, the disguise, the melding into a nice, readable surface.

The first one had assumed position of leader, her voice the most strident, leading the little mob. Now Kay was struggling to stand, and I said to the woman don't you have any compassion, any humanity? I didn't realise then how potent, how prescient those words were.

I saw the flash of anger, the loss of composure then the regaining of it, face returned to a smooth disc, all in a split second. I'd rattled her though, and as I supported Kay, my arm threaded through hers I was glad, at least, of that.

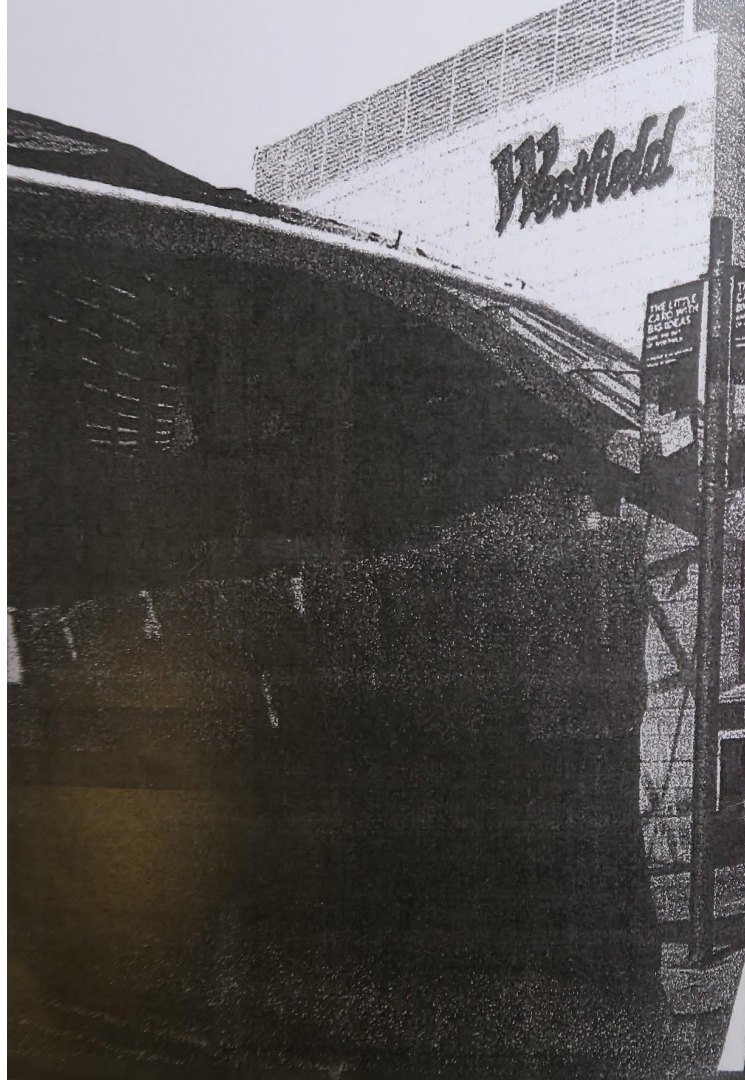






Corrugated iron seems incongruous now, a vestige of the time before, residual and stubborn. The fence is dented, I push through a gap. A scent, like nectarines, the sweet fragrance of blossom. I don't remember it from my walks with him. He'd have known about it, we drifted miles in search of places like this, empty yards, abandoned factories, wild places we could occupy. I'm intoxicated by fragrant canopies of delicate pink. Finding the orchard feels miraculous. I luxuriate in the green scents of apple, the sugary notes of plum and damson. There are little paths running through, disrupted and overgrown but still visible. I wonder who else knows about it, it can't have gone unnoticed. There's no one else around, for a second I think I've wandered too far, that I might not be able to get back. I know immediately he must have felt something like this. I've been having dreams, vivid and persistent where he tells me it's all been a mistake, that he should never have crossed over. His spirit is here, residing in the terrain, I just have to channel it, find a way to embody it. There are soft points, thresholds, ways back in.





I push through the tilting scrum of a collapsing wall. A dilapidated terrace, gardens without edges, brick enclosures growing into each other. Fuchsia and redcurrant, tangles of briars.

I realise now that the houses are occupied. There are washing lines, clothes drying in the sun. A bonfire, figures sitting around it. I step back, listen hard, try to glean fragments of conversation. There's an echo, something uncanny in the way they mumble. They've got a cassette player, a mix-tape, cuts and jumps between tracks. The light feels different, metallic and searing. I realise it's reflecting off the Westfield shopping centre.

It's still there, the graffiti, the rusting corrugated iron. I try to decipher the words, traces of white paint embedded like code-

A Class War is being waged, but only one side is fighting. Choose your weapons, choose your sides.