



Union Station is a portal, an amber capsule stranded in a tangle of freeways; there's something mesmerising in the way it unfolds, a sense of decades coming undone in the vaulted ceilings. I drift through marble halls, tiles opening in geometric patterns and wonder what you must have thought as you passed through. You conjured it through a cinematic lens, *Blade Runner* and *The Shining*, always that vexed relationship with time.

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The sky is English, a rare slate grey.

I cross corporate plazas with a sense of unease, the sense that I'm trespassing. I see myself reflected, an isolated figure in a closed circuit of office blocks. A gap opens in a wire fence, I find a path, barely discernible, scratching a line behind giant billboards. Galaxies of Sand Verbena, crushed packets of Winston Silvers, petrol vapours shimmering over the dusty track.

No one else is walking. I feel the eyes behind windscreens, the suspicion coalescing, hard and lustrous like nacre.

Vistas of worn civic buildings emerge, walls softening in the rain. Colours span like the sediments of a cliff edge, muted striations of sandstone and clay. You can see the demolition, facades kept for heritage as they churn up rooms and stairwells.

I step through rubble, follow the paths opening there. Marker pen symbols creeping over a plywood fence: diamonds, triangles, question marks. The diamonds have rays coming off them, each plane and facet radiating a strange, unknowable energy; they remind me of conspiracy theorists at Occupy or the danker reaches of the noise scene, there's a potency in them, something eerie in the unauthored message.

70s office blocks become porous, apertures opening onto powdery corridors. I'm breathing particles of the building, letting it settle on my skin.

The entrance is boarded up. I push through a fence, a rip in the blue netting. Another liminal site, an old factory, foundations opening like a mouth of bad teeth.

A concrete platform, the relics of an office. You can still see the light fittings, a steel door jamb, the sodden remnants of a filing system. Dessicated paint clings to an expanse of wall; I trace its cracks and breaks, feel the lines intersecting like a city map. Symbols skim over it – diamonds again, pulsing in inky swarms.

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I'm approaching what I think must be the centre of Downtown LA. The light is violet like the ashes of a bonfire. There's no one here except for a scattering of security guards in perspex huts.

The wafer-thin outline of a Prince song, a transistor radio in the recess of a cabin. The song decodes the city, unearths its psychic loci.

Money didn't matter yesterday, it sure don't matter 2nite-

The melancholy sweetness switches everything. On the edge of that empty lot, with its concrete fractures and blasted palms it's 1992. Flashes of that spring open in a graphic sequence, Rodney King on the ground encircled by playground inadequates, jealousy distilled in a rain of batons. That video tape, beamed across the world, was an incendiary signal, a veil torn from the face of America but in the courtroom, played in slow motion, it was soft and cushioned like a moon landing.

You remember when they announced the verdict, the anger as it tore through the city. You remember the columns of smoke rising from Florence and Normandie, the caustic stink of it, cinders landing in sooty flakes. You stocked up on provisions and it felt like the apocalypse, the whole place in lockdown.

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The sun is emerging, buttering the sidewalk with a pale-yellow glow. An intersection with shops and arcades, tunnels gnawed deep into buildings. The walls are the colour of bruised apricots. I think of the fault lines, the plates shifting beneath.

Men pushing trolleys loaded with scrap metal. I think I recognise them, from Whitechapel maybe or Bradford. I look askance at the breeze block walls, the bulging pavements.

It's a shock seeing it like this, block after block of destitution. I'd imagined Skid Row as a writhing back street but the abjection unfolds in broad boulevards, it makes it worse somehow. You warned me about tarpaulins over spindly frames, the men slumped under blankets but nothing prepared me this, the obverse side of the city, the palsied, sclerotic side.

A woman there, pale and startling like an apparition. Her hair is auburn beneath a film of dust, her eyes hazel like a cat's. She's made a shelter from sacks and packing crates. I feel bad for intruding on her corner of refuge. She steps up, unsteady on her feet. She says she can see the future, five dollars and she'll tell me. I'm getting visions of England shivering without a safety net, a brutal Hobbesian England. But her predictions, as they loop back and forth through the decades, are encoded with other times.

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There's something familiar in the new vistas opening, I'm finding my way through, getting closer. Spring Street is the centre of a lost entertainment district, a grid of abandoned cinemas and hotels.

Scrolls and chevrons are mocked by abandonment, cast out of time. The splendour of a grand theatre creaks beneath torn fabric and graffiti. I recognise the glyphs swirling above the parapets, across the boarded windows. The writing makes me think of you, the way it switches into Arabic, melts into itinerant code. Now feels like a rekindling of something, a retracing of paths.

Caverns of counterfeit bags spill onto the street. I browse the LV purses, Chanel bags smelling of vinyl and look for ways into the old auditorium behind rails and boxes.

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East 5th street. Rosslyn hotel, a neon sign crowns the building in the shape of an apple. It looks like a fairground out of season, traced outlines, bare structures, signage waiting for illumination. I wonder if it's even open. There are so many hotels around here but no foyers, no taxis crowding in front. I'm getting glints of the 80s, England as it was then, the places that brought us together. I recognise the patina of black, the casualties limping through.

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Abandoned cinemas become arcades, malls of pawnbrokers. The missing California sun is compressed in glittering display cases, jewellery lifted from a sprawl of break ups and bereavements.

Green tinsel and shamrocks strewn in messy garlands, St Patrick's Day draped around beams and light fittings. *The luck of the Irish*, second time today I've heard that phrase. I think about the family in Tipperary and Sligo, my Uncle's pub in Cork. I think about the back rooms, the shouts of *Tiocfaidh ár lá* and the rebel songs on the jukebox. And the unspoken sequences in the family, IRA men working at Fords, the move to Dagenham. Memories of it are like a room seen from outside, yellow light through a window or a crack in the door; we made the best we could from hints and intonations, glances passed across the table. In the 70s when the internments started they came up with stories like your dad was working on an oil rig. We knew there was something missing, it was like the lines in a colouring book, graphic and stark with bubbles of empty space between.

Bracelets and watches encased in opal light, eyes measuring me up behind a perspex barricade; a split second tells him if I'm buying or selling, down on my luck or dreaming of a happy occasion. Everyone is assessed like this as if fortune is a thing that can be calibrated. I think of the path you took, pawning everything, shedding identity like weight. I remember the raids, the multiple passports, the flat stripped bare in those last days.

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The Bradbury building. For you the map of Downtown LA was scored by *Blade Runner*. You marked the points in biro, drew locations in exquisite detail. We always talked about LA, conjured it like a hallucination; coral skies, palm trees, psychoactive drifts.

A cluster of mannequins in a doorway, ruched ball-gowns, bridesmaid dresses. They remind me of the ones in Whitechapel, twisting awkwardly in flashy satin. I scan the rooms above and wonder how long it'll be before they're turned into luxury apartments. It's like going back to Shoreditch in the 90s when potentials scuttled in the walls. We could hide out then, cobbled alleys and corrugated iron, unexpected taverns glowing on industrial estates. From there to the marshes we had it to ourselves.

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Images of bankers appear at every crossing, advertising hoardings issuing strange commands- *progress to Seiko*- material aspiration as spiritual path. Dilapidated walls become polished concrete. I notice the pendant lamps, the signs in retro neon, tendrils of gentrification reaching in.

The Market hall is a labyrinth, a stoner haven; ice creams drifting in pastel hues, bloated cakes toppling under glass domes. Bars and cafes are imbued with a strange solemnity as they wait for a new clientele.

I stop for a beer, I don't know how long I've been walking. The place is encrypted with hipster code, unsmiling staff, glib messages written in chalk. I need to withdraw, process the zone, sift through the fragments I've gathered. It's quiet here, no other customers, just a bland indie soundtrack. The vapidness seeps down the walls and envelops the table. I'm on hold, caught in a temporal lag, a thrift store compression of decades.

I draw symbols on a napkin, let the biro tap the memory of those walls, decipher the marks scattered across them. I know I've seen them before, swarms of crystals in marker pen, could have been Mile End, or maybe Leeds, they connect my drifts like keys to an underground vault.

I leave through the back. This is where the janitors' cupboards are, the waste disposal units, the rest rooms in plywood cubicles. I'm seeing the hidden side, the blemish under the painted face.

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I like the light in here, orange like belisha beacons. It reminds me of the streetlights we had up North, the glow in our bedrooms at night. You could imagine things then, outlines swapped and amplified.

I'm walking past doors and no one notices I'm here, I've melted into the building, gone into its subconscious. As I walk I map its neural circuits, trace lines under its skin.

A video plaza is a twitching nerve. The light is hectic, shrill and buzzing like an amusement arcade. Polystyrene spans the room like a suspended net, wires looping from missing panels. Faulty electrics, the stink of overloaded sockets, screens flashing in formation.

I listen to the voices as they collapse in the textures of a breakdown.

I'm getting closer to the heart of the building, immersing myself in a viscous soupy drone. I recognise the voice, the way it comes through the veils, Sacramento street rap slowed to a stifling, Mogadon rhythm. When it came out last summer I sent it as a YouTube rip to your old email address, the one you thought they weren't watching. I cast it like a message in a bottle and left it there waiting.

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The temperature is sultry, barely any light except fire exits glowing like embers. The sound of a television escapes from a kitchenette, a nicotine cabin with postcards from Nicaragua tacked to the wall. I wonder if I'm in the service tunnel of a hotel. Maybe that Ace Hotel I saw before, the only one that looked open. It struck me because it was the same as the one in Shoreditch.

Fervent drawings on the wall, crystals again, same as the abandoned factory, creeping like ivy above oil drums and refuse sacks. The din of a kitchen clatters out, frantic activity in the smoky heat. This is where they escape, at close of service, between rush hours. The door propped open with a beer crate is the rip in the twelve-hour shift.

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A gap slices between grand buildings, a cross hatched rendering of burnt rafters and fire escapes.

The walls are soft beneath my fingertips, a velvet layer of soot. I can smell carbon, the acrid potency of it, then the heady fragrance of jasmine. Voices buoy and subside, condensing in the heat, losing their edges; there's no language now, only pitch and frequency. In the windows I can make out fragments, little pieces in the dusky light: cornices, coving, plaster roses . Each room is a capsule, a glowing compartment. I think of the boltholes we had, the hideouts in car yards and factories.

I hear my name in a doorway. It should be a shock but it isn't, the sound of it wraps like a cocoon, a skin of silk.

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The bar radiates a deep carmine energy, black ceilings, smoky art deco windows. Your voice is the same but your accent's changed. I recognise the timbre but not the stretchy intonation, the new American inflection.

Heavy glasses of Negroni are set in front of us. I didn't hear you order them. We're the only ones here. The mood is midwinter afternoon, the truant joy of daytime drinking. I recognise you, different but same, in the intoxication of the drink I let your face crystallise. You come back in sparks, the drifts through the East End, the jasmine scented yards, the magenta light of that room.

I tuned into your longing for London, in exile you conjured it. I retraced our steps across the city, let my heels disturb those times. Colombia Road, The Birdcage, the estate before the eviction. I remember the market at Christmas with its forests of spruce, the cinnamon scents as we drifted. That song we used to play, *Nights*, cloaking the room in heavy somnambulant bass.

We list places, tear pages from notebooks. It's just like before, heaps of drawings, roads unspooling between glasses and ashtrays: Glasgow, Detroit, London. We untangle ourselves from the bar, snap the little threads holding us there.

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A fire exit opens onto a subdued shell. The walls are painted institutional green, a sombre 1940s palette. There's a sense of familiarity, a return to places I knew before, a municipal English modernism. I recognise the long corridor with parquet floors, herringbone pattern resilient under a skin of grease and dust. I like the sound of my heels as we walk, staccato taps marking the start of a new phase.

An industrial lift, cage smelling of oil and camphor. You rive the concertina door and we step in; it makes its ascent in judders and halts, dragging between floors like a petulant child. In the

psychoactive light of the mirror I search for a reflection, gold eyeshadow, smudged eyeliner, jigsaw pieces jostling to make a face.

Numbers light up beneath black fingerprints. The mechanism shudders beneath my feet, then a halt, misaligned, between storeys. You look the same, you haven't aged at all. I remember how it all seemed possible then, no borders or walls just paths under the city, a skein of M.O.D bunkers, disused hospitals, forgotten catacombs.

A shudder then a standstill.

A cavern suffused with thick cerise light, objects blurring in the dusk of it.

We walk through a wall, an aperture sledgehammered, melt into the tropical heat of a vast warehouse.

I'm recognising faces, more and more coming back. Faint at first, drawn in pale lines, then fuller, fleshed out with puffer jackets and cans of red stripe.

A load of crew from Ilford, lads I know from Barking, Idris, Ali, Ryan, Curtis, Ish,

There's an exuberance in these rooms, a vitality I'd forgotten. The euphoria of the collective space is something I never found in LA. I'm getting a surge of energy like coming up on a pill, all these conversations glittering in bright circles, it's a shock after weeks of solitary walking.

We're talking in stretchy loops, voices becoming elastic. Your eyes are onyx, then amber, shards radiating from the pupils. We thread through speaker cabs to the cool violet of the stairwell.

An icy circle opens in the ceiling. The air is glacial, everything sharpening as we climb the rungs of that ladder. I've been here before, a rooftop bounded by low walls. I recognise the parapet, the name of the building in reverse.

Empire House /esuoH eripmE.

The city unfurls like a sequin blanket; railway arches, tube stations, tower blocks blinking awake.

1934 / 1972/ 1992/ 2003/ 2016/ 2017/ 2020

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The cold is like cocaine, it snaps us awake. I feel the summons of Whitechapel, the forces pulling us back.

The fog coming up from the river, then the proximity of the street, the brittle coldness of it.

Ground floor windows are encased in Sitex, perforated steel scattering dots of light in the room. It's like those coloured maps in pathology units, patterns swirling and coalescing like migrating birds. The threshold again, a reinforced door opening onto the street. The pavements are blue with frost, dazzling and unreal like a Christmas card. I can smell wood smoke now and the scent of imminent snow.

New Road possesses a strange tranquility. The hospital is glowing red. In this suspended time, before the pavements come alive, buildings are revealed as if for the first time.

Myrdle Street, hives of brick tenements, arches leading onto narrow staircases. I glance up at the rooms above, mauve and drowsy behind curtains, the occasional dim light. I wonder if any of our lot are still in there, we used to have hideouts in these buildings, a whole network of them. There were airing cupboards leading to next door flats, weed growing under heat lamps.

Your skin has a coral glow, you wrap yourself around me. You're wearing a black sheepskin coat, you drape it across my shoulders. Our breath billows white, our hands are raw as we cup our faces. We pass Punjabi restaurants frozen behind metal shutters. I smell the traces of cumin and coriander, the syrupy sweetness of gulab jamun.

The towers of Aldgate have multiplied, I don't remember them swarming like that, crystalline and hard-edged. The lift shafts of new buildings rise in serrated formations like a Max Ernst painting, comb-like and sinister. They'd emerged a decade ago, we'd watched them shoot up from the relics of warehouses and office blocks with a coke-fuelled vigour. Now they loom before us, a strange, spinal landscape.

We're opposite that disused section of the Royal London Hospital where they had the x-ray rooms, chambers cast out in the last phase of development. A shanty town has appeared, I saw the beginnings of it before, a few tents, a few palettes, now it extends all the way down Newark Street. There are tarpaulins, blokes sifting through heaps of junk or stirring under grey duvets.

It's a shock seeing a woman there, pale and sudden like an apparition. I recognise her hair, the auburn lustre and the eyes still hazel like a cat's. She's made a shelter from sacks and packing crates. I feel bad for intruding like this, crashing on her corner of refuge. She steps up, slower than I remember, less steady on her feet. She says she can see the future, a fiver and she'll tell me. Her stories span those new towers. She talks about hostels closing, zero-tolerance policing round that zone. She embodies a vision of England shivering without a safety net, a brutal Hobbesian England. But her predictions, as they loop back and forth through the decades, are encoded with other times.

