

The Tain China Miéville

The light was hard. It seemed to flatten the walls of London, to push down onto the pavement with real weight. It was oppressive: it scoured colours of depth.

On the concrete river-walls of the south bank, a man was lying with his right hand over his face, squinting up at the bleached sky through his fingers. Watching the business of clouds. He had been there for some time, unmoving, supine on the wall top. It had rained for hours, intermittently, throughout the night. The city was still wet. The man was lying in rainwater. It had soaked through his clothes.

He listened, but heard nothing of interest.

Over time he turned his head, still shielding his eyes, until he was looking down at the walkway to his right, at the puddles. He watched them carefully, a little warily, as if they were animals.

Finally, he sat up and swung his legs down over the edge of the wall. The river was at his back, now. He leaned forward until his head hung over the path and the dirty water that blotted it. He stared into the minute ripples.

The puddle was directly below his face, and it was blank, as he had known it would be.

He looked closer, until he could see faint patterns. A veil, the ghosts of colours and shapes moved across the thin skin of water: incomprehensible but not random, according to strange vagaries.

The man stood and walked away. Behind him the sunlight hit the Thames. It did not scatter: it did not refract on the moving river into little stabs of light. It did other things.

He walked in the centre of the paths and pavements, in clear view. His pace was quick, but not panicked. A shotgun bounced on his shoulder, and periodically he swung it round and carried it to his chest, holding it as if it offered more comfort than defence.

The man crossed the river. He stopped in the shadows below the arc of Grosvenor Bridge, and clambered up its girdered underside. Where it should have been a curve of shadows, the bridge was punctured, broken by thick rays of light. The man wrestled through the holes in its structure that recent events had left.

He emerged in a crater of railway lines. An explosion had spread broken bricks and sleepers in violent concentric circles, and the metal rails had burst and buckled into a frozen splash. The man was surrounded by them. He trudged past the bomb's punctuation, to where they became train lines again.

Months ago, perhaps in the moment of that interruption, a train had stalled on the bridge. It remained. It looked quite unbroken: even its windows were whole. The driver's door hung open.

The man gripped the open door but did not look inside, did not run his hand over the instruments. He hauled himself, with the door as a ladder, to the train's flat roof. And then he stood up, gripping his gun, and looked.

His name was Sholl. He had been awake for three hours already that day, up and walking, and still he had seen no one. From the roof of the train, the city seemed empty.

To his south was the rubble that had been Battersea Power Station. Without it, the skyline was remarkable: a perpetual surprise. Sholl could see over the industrial park behind it -- the buildings there much less damaged -- to a tract of housing that looked almost as it had before the war. On the north shore, the Lister Hospital looked untouched, and the roofs of Pimlico were still sedate -- but fires were burning, and trees of poisonous smoke grew over north London.

The river was clogged with wrecks. Besides the mouldering barges that had always been there jutted the bows of police boats, and the decks and barrels of sunken gunships. Inverted tugs like rusting islands. The Thames flowed slowly around these impediments.

Light's refusal to shimmer on its surface made the river matte as dried ink, overlaid on a cut-out of London. Where the bridge's supports met the water, they disappeared into light and darkness.

Once, in a city seemingly deserted, Sholl would have explored, in fear and loneliness. But he had grown disgusted with those feelings, and with the prurience that quickly mediated them. He walked north, along the top of the train. He would follow the tracks down past the walls of London, into Victoria station.

From some miles off, from the direction of South Kensington, came a high mewing sound. Sholl gripped the shotgun. A multitude lifted from the distant streets, many thousands of indistinct bodies. They were not birds. The flock did not move in avian curves, but with spastic jerks, changing speed and direction with a suddenness birds could never manage. The things trilled and chattered, moving erratically south.

Sholl eyed them. They were animals, scavengers. Doves, they had been named, with heavy-handed irony. They could hurt a person badly, or kill, but as Sholl had expected, they ignored him. The flock passed over his head in unnerving motion. They were unclear.

Each dove was a pair of crossed human hands, linked by thumbs. Cupped palms and fingers fluttering in preposterous motion. Sholl did not watch them. He was leaning out and staring into the Thames water below him, below the doves, the water in which nothing was reflected.