

## A CONSTELLATION OF WONDROUS PLACES

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After many years of mapping the city's interior, I became tired and my enthusiasm that had powered me like strong amphetamine through the metropolis for a decade and a half began to wane. My own interests began to embarrass me; they felt like clichés, painful and obvious and trite. History had caught up with me; I'd gotten to the point where I was no longer the fresh-faced newcomer, an urban explorer forging new paths and scribbling down raw field notes. Now I was a resident of London, firmly weaved into the warp and weft of the things I had once merely observed. I was no longer an outsider; instead I was part of a club I never wanted to be a member of.

But slowly it dawned on me that I did not know the city at all. I was being self-pitying, melodramatic, ridiculous. I had only cherry-picked the parts I once considered interesting, fashionably liminal or artfully decrepit. I talked a lot about London writing, and wrote it badly myself, but much of London seemed to be missing from those works.

I became increasingly drawn to an obscure and esoteric strains of the metropolitan artistic movement known as 'London Incognita'. London Incognita was a method and genre that searched for the stories hiding in the suburbs, the mystical revelations contained in backstreets, slip roads, underpasses and shopping centres. Many of the short stories and novels that formed the loose canon of London Incognita writing were now out of print, published by defunct houses such as the Malachite Press and sold for large amounts on the internet.

Like a satellite drifting out of Earth's orbit, I began to frequent the ends of the underground lines, those places where things stopped; or at least where you had to jump on a bus or national rail to continue your journey. Places that had, in my myopic life in the inner areas of northeast London, almost seemed mythical and now possibly transcendental places. In the fiction and travel guides of London Incognita, a constellation of wondrous places presented themselves. Edgware, High Barnet, Cockfosters, Upminster, Amersham, West Ruislip, Uxbridge, Ealing Broadway, and of course – most mysterious of all to me – Morden.

One day I ended up further south than I had ever been (within London, of course, I had holidayed below the equator and enjoyed the Mediterranean, Latin America, a girls' trip to Barcelona). Morden, end of the Northern Line, a place when mentioned to colleagues they wrinkled their noses and feigned ignorance of its existence. I felt they were hiding something from me. Protecting me; or wanting to hide the place for other, more selfish and sinister, reasons.

'But you can see it is there,' I said, pointing at Morden tube station on the ripped page of a battered A-Z.

'Why do you still have that A-Z?' they asked angrily, batting the book from my hands, before dismissing me and my outlandish suggestions. I clicked frantically at my laptop, swiftly trying to summon up Google maps, but they had already left the room before I could show them the truth.

It didn't matter. I went there myself and I travelled alone, on foot. I tracked the old Roman road, read about the family Garth, admired the size and scope of Baitul Futuh mosque. Not a religious woman myself, I still marveled at the diversity and complexity of religious architecture. I could barely believe I had stumbled upon the largest mosque in the United Kingdom; I fondly recalled my trips to the Hindu temple

in the grey pollution of Neasden. My enthusiasm was flowing back and I began percolating with love for the city.

Every day I ate sandwiches and crisps bought from the local high street supermarket, and sat by the River Wandle as it flowed through Morden Hall Park. It was the first heated flush of summer and it was a pleasure to be there. I wrestled with profound questions, such as whether I was in Surrey or in London, and what did London mean in the first place, and what were my true motivations?

I texted my friends pictures of the Wandle, of Baital Futuh, of the park's national trust signs and footbridges. I photographed herons and tried to record the sound of a green woodpecker I heard hammering in the trees.

'This is fake news, an obvious hoax,' they said. 'A clever use of Photoshop.' But by now I suspected the truth, that my so-called friends were already privy to the secrets of London Incognita and were trying to deny me access. But I was ahead of them, had seen through their cheap deceptions.

'What do the people in South London think of it being called the Northern Line,' a friend of mine asked me in Irish chain pub near Wimbledon (we had taken to meeting in arbitrary drinking holes in areas we felt we knew little about but wished to explore further). I had no answer to that.

Many months went by uneventfully, until today. I was walking back from my daily circuit of Morden and South Merton, along London Road and towards the underground. The sun was beating down without remorse, but this I enjoyed. I was a Londoner and appreciated being scorched, reddened like lobster, dried out and cracked. The street was dusty, with an Oxfam, a Greggs next to a newsagent, a Sainsburys, and an optician. Approaching Morden underground, however, I realised the station had moved, or disappeared. In its place stood a group of teenagers smoking, a sick-looking tree hosting a resting flock of green parakeets and an elderly man sat on a bench reading yesterday's newspaper.

'Am I in Morden,' I asked the old man. He laughed hysterically before breaking into a hacking cough, spittle flying from his mouth. I left it at that.

And then I imagined myself falling into water and drifting down through the layers of London, as if it were an ocean, which in a way it was. Did this make Morden the abyssopelagic zone, and I was now stuck there?