

# I fall asleep trying to love/stop loving you (*Date Unknown*)

*Bertie Brandes*

I remember London (*50AD to Present Day*)

Does it remember me? (*1990 to Present Day*)

I remember London back when there were no seasons, just day and night.

Before any of that happened. When there was no time to notice anything, just music and lights, spinning like sirens behind locked doors. And nights that were never dark, never had a hint of darkness to them. Lit by the pure fluorescence of a city we hadn't seen before, that we could not have dreamed up.

Back then midnight arrived like a circus  
our soft feet treading red carpeted stairs  
mirrors on every wall  
and learning to drink when you're not thirsty.

My 15-year-old body (*2005*) thin and strong, lips like a pink bow, pale skin  
singing  
my body a bell  
that suddenly started ringing.

—

Today (*2024*) I am unable to stay awake in the bookshop on Gower Street (*1956 to Present Day*), where I have come to look up poets I might borrow from for this piece. It's nearly 4pm and I'm jet-lagged by new medication. It takes effort not to roll my head back on the padded chair and sleep here until the shop shuts. For some reason I think of a day (*2005*) sobbing in the Starbucks on Hampstead High Street (*2001-2017*) when a man sitting opposite me gently reached over with a tissue. Later he told me his wife was dying of cancer. There

are people you never forget as long as you live. Shape of your face in the lamp light (2024). You are older now (1993 to Present Day). So am I.

Before leaving the shop I buy a book I don't want that details many London clubs and music venues which have closed down. I promise myself I don't have to read it, won't even have to look at it. The book drops like a chunk of tombstone into my bag and weighs heavy the entire way home. All I can think about is burying it on some low and hidden part of my bookshelf as soon as I get in. The book is now lost, thank God.

On Torrington Place a whole wall without windows bookends a row of houses (1824 to Present Day). The brown bricks are turning silver somehow, but I have to stop looking in order to keep walking.

Crossing the street, sudden urge to close my eyes again  
invisible hooks pull me in different directions  
places living, places dead  
people living, people dead  
I speak both languages, all of them.

The ghosts don't always hurt but they're always there  
left spinning without graveyards to hold them  
and haunted themselves, I'm sure.

—

One of these hooks pulls up Roseberry Avenue and along Essex Road to a pub called The Duke of Clarence (1834-2006). This was the first place I tried cocaine (2005), the first place I saw Babyshambles play (2005) the first place I fell in love (2005) – but maybe it wasn't love, so maybe forget that one. This was the first place I sat staring at visions outside on a kerb stone, my head between my knees, and heard my name spoken by someone (1981 to Present Day... ?) who saw something in me that wasn't there to see.

You had to go to this pub in the afternoon and buy a raffle ticket from the bartender and then later, after closing time, come back and bang on the locked door. But ticket or no ticket, they would always lift our light bodies over the threshold. Inside it was the circus. We were spinning, singing, pretending to smoke with lit cigarettes. I sat on the floor with all the other long-haired girls, wearing angel wings stolen from the middle school dress-up box.

Waking up on the night bus covered in sweat, tasting amphetamines  
ears ringing  
bodies ringing.

—

That was before.

—

Other hooks pull in different ways. There are names that, spoken out loud, cause whole hours, whole afternoons, to gape like open graves.

I get used to the new medication (2024), but getting used to it reduces its effects. The following Friday I walk over the Regents Park Road Footbridge (1842 to Present Day) which used to be part of my daily commute (2008). I try to remember anything about that teenager who was allegedly me. I feel like a stranger in the city. But all I am is the city.

—

Saturday. Another hook.

Mind plays tricks to convince you that Charing Cross Road was ever home to anything that mattered. Now *entertainment spaces* built like vending machines into the lobbies of luxury flats. I'm relieved when I see a vape shop. Trying and failing to call up the euphoria of the concert queue, of scrambling after live shows for paper set lists, as the surgical scrub green exterior of Blank Street Coffee (2023 - Present Day) blinks back.

At The Astoria (1976 - 2009) I felt beer soak my hair for the first time (2004) and let it cling to my neck and snake down the back of my T-shirt. Waiting forever for the music to start. One night in December (2004) the headliner didn't show up and the entire room rushed on to the stage, no boundaries between where we could and couldn't go, what we could and couldn't do. That idea of freedom stayed with me. Maybe that idea of freedom is what led me to you. What continues to (2018, 2019, 2020, 2023, 2024).

—

On the 38 along New Oxford Street, hooks drag under the indignity of what ate the city, what shuttered the doorways that were meant to lead down to midnight forever. "I used to come here", I tell no one, ever.

The Outernet (2021 - Present Day)

@SohoPlace (2022 to Present Day)

Chateau Denmark (2022 to Present Day)

London grinds my bones down into plaster

Mean Fiddler (2001 - 2007)

The End (1995 - 2009)

Sometimes I close my eyes when the bus rounds this bend.

—

Other places remain

a house at the end of Brick Lane

a back garden in Streatham with a paddling pool half-inflated and tepid

a bed upstairs with blood-stained sheets

every kind of ecstasy

and then

summer came and went

and then

the rent.

—

On Sunday I lie across the footprints of druids on Primrose Hill (1792) and drink water from a cup of melted ice cubes which tastes straight from a fountain, alkaline and stone-cooled. I start to remember places that I later spend

hours trying and failing to find online. Was it the 100 Club which had the backstage you had to climb down a trapdoor to get in to? Or was that the place on Curtain Road where (1981 - Present day...?) smashed a wine bottle in half and chased a teenage boy around with it trying to kill him (2005). Arguments over who spilled the blood on the bedsheets in Streatham and when (2005). And learning, without realising, what it feels like to be weighed up in flesh and skin. To have unknowingly lost something. Angel wings lying forgotten.

—

To what end?

—

London, one day my blood will run in your drains (Date Unknown)

meeting tears that sprinkled granite in Islington (2006)

my body will stiffen like my hymen tore like my hair falls in a blanket like rain

there is an inevitability to all of this.

—

But I have kept secrets of my own, buried chips of bone and stashed relics. My white fingernails between new bricks in Soho. Teeth dropped into wet cement at midnight on Whitechapel Road. Somehow even more at home in a place that knows it is no place like home.

—

There go my dead, not worthy of stone

and there go the dead buildings, listed in dead books

London leaves nothing to lay claim to

but the hooks remain

and I am a hook.