

Island Story: Journeying Through Unfamiliar Britain

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To my old man

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Introduction

Picture the mind as a terrain. Highways, byways, laybys and traps, laid over an expanse as vast as the sun and as predictable as laughter. These roads of the mind ebb and flow like electric

charge. Nothing is still, though tranquillity remains a prevailing illusion. Each route is circular, beginning and ending with where you are now.

I have potted down such paths, searching for some elusive satisfaction that the sages call peace. Others stalk the same terrain with alacrity and obsession, letting grey streets or green horizons imprint themselves with genetic certainty. They commend the well-trodden path, less likely to lose one's footing or track. Habits groove into stubborn repetition: keep off the grass. Others take shortcuts, desire paths, where grass is gored by impatient feet, the soil bald and smooth, leaving behind a perpendicular line from A to C without the romance of B.

Each mind contains its entire universe, for each senses everything it can know at any given time. And yet if each contains a near-infinite range of imaginary possibility, it's remarkable how each senses and acts alike. Neurones and algorithms reinforce similar behaviours for simplicity's sake. Some enjoy telling others to keep off their grass. They talk of territory, not terrain, and navigate by map, not meander. The distinction is significant. For this terrain expands as far as one's ability to sense it, the view from where one stands, sits or crawls.

It may be strange to begin an account of an unlikely cyclo-safari across Britain with a thought experiment. Confusion is at the root of any journey through the unrecognised, assailed by fears of becoming lost, the legality of peeing (or sleeping) in bushes, or not returning home on time. Disliking disorientation, one habitually returns to the familiar. But what is down that way?

Over four months I went cycling across Britain, gathering stories, seeking out something I couldn't yet name. Serendipity and a smartphone chartered my course, and a compass when either failed. I camped in parks and playing fields, forests and castles, and I slept in the houses of an improbable number of strangers. Some I met in pubs, others had heard word of my journey. Along the way I met farmers and fishermen, miners, nurses and teachers, civil servants and millionaires, professors and probation officers, artists and students, a film actor, homeless people for whom a sleeping bag was no stunt, and many men and women working in the service sector or unemployed, poverty blurring the boundaries. I asked them about their lives. The method was like that of William Cobbett, 'reasoning with some, laughing with others, and observing all that passes'. I transcribed their stories and wrote my impressions, reading widely, pursuing clues, seeking coherency.

The idea to just go out there had embedded itself long ago, resurfacing during emotional dislocation, like stress at work, or an irresolvable falling-out with a close friend. I desired the not-known path, to boot through the brickwork barricading this well-worn way from the splendour of the strange. Serene forest scenes, air zinging with juniper, whatever that smelled like. Intimacy with sun, not screen. But my skint status and a depressed acquiescence tethered me down. I made the common error of confusing disappointment with adulthood. Then something unusual happened.

Good time to rehearse my alibi. For the next many months I'd be asked to account for myself. I am twenty-seven years old, a native son of South London. My twenties have disappeared in its bars and its bar work, and working in a brain-injury service and a men's suicide-prevention initiative. I'd written benefits applications for carers and then appeals when they were turned

down, issued food vouchers and platitudes on how things would improve. I'd seen first-hand the cruelty and stupidity of a war against the poor, and a prevailing helplessness that calloused into indifference. I felt unsatisfied by the answers to the left and right of me. In doubting them, I doubted myself too. What did I know? My friends were people like me, I'd barely seen much of Britain at all. So I resolved to hear and observe what life was like for others, and from that, make up my own mind.

South London's lesser state schools strive to blunt the intellectual curiosity of all those who enter them. In my case, they were only partly successful. I've no Oxbridge credentials or well-connected kin, and live in social housing with my partner. Mine's a common story. But hear me speak and I am middle class, unprepossessing, softly spoken. Education's had that impact. Being shy by nature I've often felt an outsider, blending in with conversational camouflage. My city's a haven for outsiders. Now cranes dominate the horizon, communities being replaced with commercial opportunities, familial homes converted into aspirational housing. Their cause is not endogenous. A paper trail into the tax havens or an anti-capitalist tract could only give half their story. What else could it indicate?

So I sought to make a destination of the horizon, and find out other stories. But the sluggish waters of pubs provide safe harbour for almost every peccadillo. One needs more than discontent and wanderlust. A bung, for instance. Like a PhD scholarship from a small university I'd won the year before. That's the clincher. It gives a modest income to rummage through a dead philosopher's treatises on desire. It gives immodest free time.

I'd never 'travelled' before, in the gap-year backpacker sense. But I couldn't afford endless train tickets or cosy cottage B&Bs. Means made the method. With no more than a score spent on the tent I'd call home, I borrowed or was gifted the rest. And then there was the bike.

'Not stolen is it?' I asked Bob at his second-hand shop off the Walworth Road. £70 seemed too good, churlish to haggle. 'Oh no', he chuckled, earnestly. I'd learn the truth of this. With ten gears and a rusty chain, the Raleigh Pioneer felt like it'd never gone beyond the Elephant & Castle. We had that in common. Its dramatics come later, alongside the eccentrics, sad and hopeful stories, heady encounters, lost histories and bizarre adventures. Between those, the story of an island.

This is no quest to unearth the real Britain or other things of fable. Much of modern national identity is rooted in what people believe about the present and past, rather than what's actually the case. Myths have more operative power. Ossian, Arthur, St George and the Barddas are all fabrications. What will future historians make as their modern counterparts?

In attempting to incorporate many aspects of an island, I cannot satisfy all. The most accurate map has the scale 1:1, like the 'map of the Empire whose size was that of an Empire' depicted by Borges. Such a map serves no-one. The last who tried this was John Leland, who 'fell beside his wits' some years into undertaking his 'Laborious Journey and Serche' across 16th century Britain, mapping each inch of the island with words. There is no completing any journey, the mind lingeringly retraces its wanderings. This is a work about the pleasure and commitment of

journeying. Perspective is one with its location. When one's sense of perspective changes, a new terrain comes into being.

Chapter 1. Prehistories

'You been chucked out or summat mate?' – Tucker.

It's a fair question. Clearly I'd fallen on hard times. Sun long-set, I'd re-surfaced on Canvey Island, Essex, from a day's forays in blind wilderness. Slimy salty chips from the esplanade, pebbledash squaring off against the cool teal-grey sea. Behind me was 'Fantasy Island', the sarcastic moniker of a deserted amusement arcade, spangling golds a-glimmer, jingle jangle. The lights of a nearby boozier had compelled me.

I'm bedraggled and weary, and struggling with the weight of two large sacks and a sleeping bag. A tough-looking geezer with a skinhead sharp enough to spark a match holds the door open for me, sympathetically. The barmaid ahead beckons me, her bright peroxide blob bringing colour to the otherwise dark brickwork of the pub. 'You alwight lav?' Give me a second...

Stowing my worldly belongings beneath a bar-stool, I request the therapeutic intervention of a pint. A pool table stands alone, forlorn, and a fruitie rattles and sings like a bored child. The barmaid's eyebrow arches mischievously as she takes my change, and, after a spell of silence so pregnant not even Bon Jovi's soaring choruses can dispel it, bald-headed Tucker asks what everyone else is thinking. It takes some moments to summon an answer.

What was my alibi again?

I'd left home that afternoon with no fixed trajectory. East, broadly. How far would I get? Southend, possibly. The suggestion of cycling there seemed a joke to many. 'Today?' 'On that?' 'You are joking...' I felt like Don Quixote but was compared to Del Boy. But I wanted to understand Romford, Billericay and Basildon, Essex towns as quotidian and obscure as the production of cheddar, the conservatism of electorates, or the consistent disappointment of the island's national sports teams. It wasn't a linear route, nor a particularly obvious one. I'd once cycled fifty miles on a circular ride before, and couldn't walk the next day. My rusty bike might be fine for a trip down the shops, but for cycling seventy miles all day, every day, on a circumnavigatory journey around the British Isles?

As my partner Sarah waved me off, her wry scepticism was obvious. I'd be home in a few days surely, tail between legs. 'How long will it take you?' she asked. 'No idea sweetie', I replied, and it was true. I'd not undertaken any training or even determined a route. I didn't even have a map.

Objectively speaking, this was a bad idea. But there's method in this madness, for without prior plans or preconceptions, I'd be at the mercy of people's testimonies, goodwill and my own

impressions. None could be called reliable either, but at least they were unfamiliar. I sought revelation in the new.

So without fanfare, I set off, leaving behind the estate I called home in South London. It's familiar country so far, the Georgian townhouses of Kennington, through to the town-planning mess of the Elephant & Castle, where sun-baked bus fumes burn my throat. South London's social housing is being demolished and replaced with luxury apartments, its communities priced out to the suburbs. The craft beer bars, organic bakeries and galleries are garrisons along a front-line. Only a matter of time before my estate is also bulldozed, replaced with luxury 'affordable housing' five times my neighbours' salaries, pre-purchased by investors seeking a secure return. Two ways of understanding a property-owning democracy.

But mentioning ideology would have an Oxbridge journalist spit out their latte. Like the island's infrastructure, power shapes the scene, whilst remaining out of sight. Meritocracy, the rule of private enterprise. People used to call it hegemony, but even that connoted mutton chops and donkey jackets. Don't take it seriously, the mantra of our more cool and asinine era. But being skint makes one serious, if a little morose! Now Borough High Street, the conspicuous consumption of its luxury street market, the Shard which, more than anything, impales South London into prone submission. Over London Bridge and the muggy Thames, into the old City, a place where corporations live and money votes. Everyone knows of London, and London knows of nothing else. London! I can't bear it any longer, stewing in its stresses, disappointments and ineffectual raging. I have to find the exit.

East along Whitechapel High Street, the composition changing. Even the city's new wealth hasn't altered the profile of this poor migrant quarter, its street market and takeaways still owning the scene, salty boozers and supermarkets giving way to the university complex at Mile End and, ahead, Stratford. Again it's all familiar but contested, like children disputing the estate of an absent father whose death hasn't yet been ascertained.

Haribo-coloured phalli and luxury apartment blocks, a vast mall beside an even vaster mall, an eye-watering traffic system. 'Regenerated' by the Olympics, the area's parkland and allotments have been concreted over and its poor tenants evicted, for the sake of a sports show the city couldn't afford. Toshing through contemporary ruins like these, seeking ways to release repressed desires for freedom, Laura Oldfield Ford has described Stratford as 'colonized, submerged beneath dull expanses of corporate landscaping'. Iain Sinclair, another familiar traveller, called the Olympics the 'scam of scams', a slurry of heritage phantasmagoria or 'ghost milk'.

But neither soothsayer approached the quotidian features of this landscape. Discount chain supermarkets and pubs are heaving, people enjoying the modern activity called bargain-hunting. But that isn't insightful either. The answer's indicated by the high streets of Forest Gate, Manor Park and Ilford, the peeling poundshops, internet cafés and non-European foodstores of the parades, and the cramped terraces veering off behind them, the sheer poverty of the surrounding area and its marked ethnic composition, mostly Bangladeshi and Pakistani. Obscene displays of corporate riches and private wealth are only possible through the systematic defeat and

acquiescence of a large body of low-paid workers. East London's situation seems indicative of something much wider. The question is less how, more why?

Chadwell Heath and into Romford, and another change. A frontier is crossed, separating a largely poor Bangladeshi and Pakistani area from a largely poor white-British area. Each community deploys its tribal markets to assert a common identity, one whose high-contrast burn in the multicultural city leads at times to self-parody. The United Kingdom Independence Party seems popular, as I pass through, purple pound signs posted on the sides of houses and roads. The largely white working class with its markers of modern 'Englishness' remains despised by its middle class uppers, but snobbery has taken a moral tone of late. Chavs is well-known. It extends further, into bad junk food and bad obese bodies, bad sports clothes and bad tattoos, badly behaved children and their bad language, and their bad attitudes to migrants, made to compete for the lowest wage. The Spanish au pair who doesn't ask for holiday pay, the unthreatening Polish plumber who doesn't answer back. A vast swathe of the population had been made to feel inferior, tacky, vulgar, violent, stupid, ugly, chavvy. Despite the obvious contradictions, these pound signs raised two fingers up to the middle classes and their political establishment. It will be the first of many subterranean signs of revolt.

Harold Wood and into Noak Hill, endless early 20th century council estates of the red-brick, low-rise, Tudor Walters standard, spacious and with neat gardens. They forgot to build amenities of any kind, and there's no obvious place of communal interaction, few pubs for the feckless drinking classes, few leisure centres, nary even a church. Housing by numbers. Though they're a profound improvement on the inner-city slums they relieved, sociality and communality were not incorporated into the design regulations. I'd lived on a similarly vast council estate on the other side of London in St Pauls Cray, Kent, in my late teens. There are countless others surrounding London. Built approximately nowhere with no transport connections, mine was a fertile seedbed for casual aggression and depression.

But this relates to the déclassé Victorian terraces east of Stratford too. The lack of colour and variety to these structures stunts the imagination. Social status is zoned into these suburbs. Net curtains, statins, anti-depressants, property speculation or the pillorying of the poor as TV entertainment. The city's cleaners, carers, delivery-drivers and shop-workers hail from places like these. By a small wood near Noak Hill, intimating Essex country, a friendly woman points me the way to Billericay, and I asked about the area. 'Not so bad', she thought.

There's a danger in reading the landscape through a looking-glass, of reproducing 'Brixton in Ullapool and Tunbridge Wells in Scourie', as Edwin Muir said of English travellers in Scotland. When confronted with the unfamiliar, many travellers blaviate about sore feet and bike repairs, hotel room-service, dinner-party conversations and other tiresome auto-memoirs. I resolve not to do this. Better to assess the terrain as it is, through those who live it. The 'landscape itself, to those who know how to read it aright, is the richest historical record we possess', wrote historian W.G. Hoskins. Into apt country: Essex.

Through Billericay, among over-preened rose bushes and privet hedges, paved driveways, four by fours, empty birdfeeders, evidence of continual DIY. Signs of a suburban structure of feeling

that has internalised the messy complexity of social life and relations into four solid CCTV-monitored walls. 'Don't you find shopping boring though Ange? I do hate it... I grab anything I can see, bung it in my wheelie, he writes me a cheque, we bung it in the car and we bring it home', boasts Beverly. But Abigail's Party is nearly forty years old. Peep Show is more apt, the dislocation of modern adult life into isolated suburban lounges, eyes lit by screens, negative solidarity. 'I feel like my soul is being chipped away bit by bit', says Jez; 'Welcome to the world of work', replies Mark, stiffly. Two polar reactions to disappointed desire, the pressure on romantic monogamy and career success to bear the burden of disappointed fantasies of the good life. Unlike socialism, the suburbs made few promises. Discount supermarket alcohol and widescreen TVs with infinite shows have had more political impact in this terrain than any political-party speech or pamphlet.

Occasional fields appear, interrupting a scape that then becomes dominated by an expanse of light industrial warehouses. The buildings are all grubby, the area unflinchingly tart and suspicious of reforming impulses. 'Basildon? It's MILES away!' says one man, a little out of town. The accent's sourer than East London, vowels more elongated and flattened, more monotone. Ten minutes later, I'm among its deserted street market, in a commuter new town surrounded by boarded-up shops and a bawdy boozier. Into the latter I turn. Conversation's rough and ready, quick to dispense with formalities, suspicious of abstract thinking. 'We're all different, but once you start bullshitting and lying, I don't want to know', says one young man on an adjacent table, on the question of identity. 'I don't give a monkey's, let's hope I don't get breathalysed', says another, as tequila chasers are passed round. 'Fair play', I reply, already disorientated. Darkness is falling, fatigue riddles my bones. The prospect of finding some secluded spot to sleep fills me with dread and uncertainty. It won't be in Basildon.

Pitsea, London's influence ebbing. Concrete flyovers, industrial estates and the stench of sewage treatment and a nearby landfill site. Buzzing pylons and distant port lights, a grey zone, stone becoming marsh becoming Thames becoming sky. There's an unlikely natural haven at Wat Tyler park, a pleasant strip of country park, the air humming with evening birdsong and the icky-sweet smell of decomposing rubbish. I rove around the deserted terrain, ex-industrial land reclaimed, resistant to abstract interpretation. The nearby Tesco was, until recently, the largest supermarket in Europe. Nothing else here. Yet beneath the man-made nature-scape is a history riper than the rotting waste, one that merits digression.

It's unclear why the park's named after the leader of the Peasants' Revolt of 1381, who led the rebels of Kent, whilst Jack Straw headed those of Essex. The revolt did begin in nearby Fobbing, on the other side of Vange Creek, when villagers chased out a tax-collector, killed his servants, and began to attack the manors of the gentry. They were ostensibly up in arms against paying a flat-rate Poll Tax, but many also wanted to end the unfair feudal system, wherein the majority of the population were forced, as serfs, to work the local lord's lands, forests and mines without payment, or face imprisonment. The Black Death had wiped out much of the working population in 1349, yet a statute two years later set a maximum wage at a prohibitively low level. A corrupt Church continued to extract money from the poor through tithes whilst siding with the powerful. The implicit parallels with the contemporary moment are striking, yet the story is little

understood. What had led the people of Essex, Kent and the surrounding regions to rise up, and demand popular government and the equal rights of the commons?

They gathered at Mile End and Blackheath, awaiting a response from the teenage king and his retinue. When none came, sympathisers in London opened the city gates. The peasants surged inside, burning down prisons, palaces and legal archives, attacking lawyers, merchants and tax-collectors. The Archbishop of Canterbury was beheaded, and rebels elsewhere ransacked Cambridge University. It was a popular revolt against elites. Agitators spread the revolt. Many were rebellious members of the clergy, Lollards, a term with a thick connotation of laziness, lying around, workshy habits. They followed John Wycliffe, who was translating the Bible into English, so that the majority could understand it. They were sceptical of the Eucharist and contemptuous of church wealth. John Ball was one of the most radical of them, preaching the equality of all human beings under God.

Some rebels wrote to each other, spreading the revolt, others moved from town to town, like John Wrawe, who went from Essex into Suffolk, leading people to rise up and attack the property of those who'd exploited them. The dispossessed and poor had long been aggrieved, but once they saw the force and the reality of the uprising, they joined in. For a time there was a popular collective desire for equality and justice.

Tyler eventually forced a meeting with King Richard II at Smithfield. He demanded that the Church's wealth be given to the poor, that justice be fairer, that 'all men should be free and of one condition', as one chronicler paraphrases, thereby dissolving feudal society's class distinctions between knights, clergy, lords and serfs. Tens of thousands had massed, including skilled yeomen, priests and knights. They called themselves 'the commons', the common people in whom power was intrinsically held. 'Democracy', another era would call it. According to that same chronicle, 'the said commons had a watch-word in English among themselves, "With whom haldes yow?"', to which the reply was "Wyth kyng Richard and wyth the trew commons"'.

The King promised to grant all the demands of the true commons, but had Tyler murdered there and then on sly pretences. The peasants were assured they'd be given their charter of rights, and were dispatched out of the city, only to be hunted down and murdered at their camp in Billericay in the following weeks. Their mistake was to trust in the goodwill of the powerful. The Poll Tax would return again in 1381 under Margaret Thatcher. Silent scene.

And so a short spin to nearby Canvey Island, nightfall now. A sour array of drab terraces slink into the sea. Chips from Nigel's, sitting out on the Eastern Esplanade, surveying the lit chimneys of the distant power station on the Isle of Grain, the oil storage tankers on Canvey's edge. The atmosphere is distilled in the no-nonsense beer and amphetamine rock of Wilko Johnson and Dr Feelgood, down by the jetty. Irreverent and unpretentious, there is a peculiar energy to Canvey. Unvarnished, plain-speaking, tough-headed. My body is broken. A strong drink is needed...

'Wos appened mate?'

Four sets of eyes glare in mute incomprehension. Words find their way out the wilds, as much an instruction to myself as to Tucker, the barmaid and the gaping boozier.

‘I’m gonna cycle round Britain mate. Find out about the island.’

He and his mate laugh, and I laugh too, words so obviously naïve, especially from the weedy guy uttering them. They buy me a pint. ‘Why would ya wanna see Canvey?’ It’s a question I’d often be asked in many parts. ‘Tell me about life in this place.’ This question, asked without much thought at the time, would become my opening line thereafter. And so they did: they rubbished nearby pubs, spoke of the flood of 1953, and Dr Feelgood, and the island’s cult football team. Canvey revels in its exceptions, unexceptional though they are. In its antipathy to outsiders it promised a microcosmic glimpse of its parent Fantasy Island. Tucker’s about to quit tattooing, sick of tribal tattoos, burnout on the coalface of mass individualism.

‘Good luck san, you’ll need it.’ Indeed. Approaching midnight, I drunkenly head out into a torrential downpour.

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Hadleigh Park Colony. The Salvation Army established a farm, factory and brickworks here in 1891, on the northern banks of the Thames estuary. It would ‘supply a place where broken men of bad habits... can be reformed, and ultimately sent out to situations, or as emigrants to Canada’, as one backer put it. They made bricks, toys and pottery, bred cattle, chicken and horses, and grew crops in fields, orchards and greenhouses. Four hundred men of the East End poor would be sent to live here at any one time in corrugated barracks. Then as now, their poverty was attributed to a moral failing, their immorally workshy attitudes required reprogramming. The hard work and clean air was considered improving.

The farm still exists, but not to the same extent. Fittingly perhaps, I’d been too drunk last night to locate the old colony where I’d been tipped to wild-camp, and in the desperation of the midnight deluge, I’d put up my tent in what looked like secluded parkland. Morning’s cruel light reveals an all-too-public dog-walkers’ domain. Pooches sniff the tent, owners wait awkwardly from a distance. The owner of the nearby Benfleet boating club tells me to hop it. A Bermondsey man, he’s amused by my story and I buy myself some time. He talks of the East Londoners who’ve moved out here, many buying caravans, chalets, some even boats. Politely, he declines an offer of cooked beans from my camping stove. Gruelling hangover. These bad habits will not be reformed just yet.

But everything hurts. I can hardly walk, let alone think, and would sooner have a healthy tooth yanked out than spend another day in the saddle. I survey my belongings. Surely there’s a way of lightening the load?

I’ve the shirt on my back and a pair of jeans, and another spare, and shorts too. Another shirt and two t-shirts are essential, and four days’ undergarments. How long will I be gone? No idea, a

month, six months, perhaps. I'll soon become comfortable with the laxer hygiene regime of the long-distance traveller, but that toothbrush, deodorant, razor, shower gel, nail-clippers, pomade and comb are indispensable. The towel doubles up as a pillow. The helmet and high-vis belt will improve survival odds on country roads. Jumper, Harrington jacket and trapper hat for the cold nights. A small laptop and camera for documenting the journey, but there's already a large speck in its lens. A Swiss Army knife and a compass. It'll help to know broadly which direction to cycle towards.

A garden trowel? Its use is suggested by the accompanying bog-roll. I'll be digging my toilet. Sleeping bag and mat? A matter of economy, to make sleeping in fields, beaches, parks and wasteland less unbearable. Repair kit and spare inner tube? I can hardly fix a puncture, but needs must. Scotch? A tried-and-tested sleeping remedy and salve for tired nerves. What else?

Two waterproof Carradice panniers, not especially large. Ilford's potholes broke the hooks of one, now fastened to the bike with ropes. Three books, unnecessary. Notebooks, headphones, ditto. A gram of MDMA and some acid? I'll keep these divination devices for the longer nights. This large stove and gas cans? More practical, but too bulky. They go, along with my food and bowl. 'Do you want it?' I ask the postmistress of Shoeburyness later, as I parcel up my gear to send home. 'Umm, the dog might like it.' 'It's yours!'

Feeling lighter but no less in pain, I head on. A lorry gives me a friendly toot. Inside, one of the fellas I'd drunk with last night commandeers the dashboard and grins. Reaffirmed and ready, bring on the road!

Shoeburyness was not far from where I'd awoken. A tough path cut from the farm through scrubby parkland, flanked on my right by estuarine saltings. The briny air trilled with parleying gulls and jingling sail-boats. Then leafy detached tudorbethan suburbia, Chalkwell, Leigh and Westcliff-on-Sea, a London air still, a commuter zone. Southend comes next, the classic cockney daytrip-destination of choice. The esplanade is in good shape, fresh cream paint and the distant fronds of palm trees tickle the horizon. It is still loved, Southend, its improbable theme park, pier and crazy golf doing a good trade, as are the chippies and boozers behind them. Sat in deck-chairs or lying fully dressed on the modest, pebbly beach, most look content if somewhat disappointed, and some have umbrellas even though no rain is forecast. It's evidence of a specific kind of native wisdom, at peace with the inevitability of suffering. In the unlikely event that it doesn't rain by the seaside, the broly can be used to fend off seagulls whilst eating an ice-cream.

At Shoeburyness, the beach is cordoned-off due to the discovery of unexploded WW2 bombs. I ask a preoccupied-looking old gent about the area, who guffaws, kneads the pale skin of his mush where a phantom moustache resides, begins a sortie on Jerry artillery then loses his thread, and glares into the sea in silence. 'Terrible thing, war', drifting out again. He points to a large boom built during that war to prevent German ships and submarines sailing up the Thames. A nearby Ministry-of-Defence sign warns that gun practice continues today. Further east is Foulness, an island belonging to the MOD but with a small population. It has been sub-contracted to a private military research firm to experiment with munitions. One is not allowed to

visit except with special permission, and cameras are not permitted. It is the first of many signs of the widespread yet oddly unacknowledged activities of the military around the island.

North, past Southend's airport, among a familiar oneiric scene of retail parks and dual carriageways, fast-food drive-thrus, the banal Britain we spend all our time in and rarely think about. I wonder what its effects are at the basic level of the imagination, if somehow this similar-looking, predictable world inhibits the speculative possibility of difference and change. Pedalling on, the suburbia starting to thin, until short bursts of farmland begin to slice the scene, adding much-needed green between the villages of Sutton-with-Shopland and Stambridge.

A little after five I reach the edge of Wallasea Island, where a small ferry takes foot passengers over the River Crouch to Burnham. The last one's just departed. It's a three-hour cycle round otherwise, and I decide to call it a day. There's a small bar improbably open at the marina with views over the bay. The landlady tells me of a campsite nearby. A family is having farewell drinks, a teenage daughter about to head off to work in the nightclubs of Kavos. They warn her not to drink too much and chase after the boys, and she says she'll miss them all so terribly, words insincere but with generous feeling. And me on my lonesome, this vast island ahead, muscles and mind all mangled. Here is the threshold between home and the unknown, folly and pilgrimage. It takes a third bottle of beer to screw my courage back into the sticking place.

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Love is vital, love is worth it all, says John the ferryman, married forty-two years, as our small vessel chugs over the Crouch. Ahead is a cheery old village, its beer gardens spilling onto the shore, and all around us marsh, skirted in reeds.

Daniel Defoe passed here three hundred years ago on his island journey, and remarked on the 'strange decay of the [female] sex' caused by these malarial marshes. Women particularly suffered poor health and died young, and Defoe heard of one farmer who was on his twenty-fifth wife. Not all travellers recognise the glee of locals in pulling their legs with grotesques. But much of the eastern coastline was marshy like this, inhospitable to dwellings and farming, until Dutch engineers began to oversee its drainage around the time of Defoe. But these dark mudflats still retain something of the not-quite-right about them. Local musicians, These New Puritans, have produced an esoteric poetics for this scene, making secret recordings in the marsh. Here's a distinctive border-zone between earth, sea and sky, with different modes of existence above and below the waterline.

H.G. Wells once gazed out at this scene and envisioned the smoking heat-rays of three-legged Martian fighting-machines wading through the waters from Foulness in War of the Worlds, as Londoners attempt to escape on steamboats. The invaders are 'vital, intense, inhuman, crippled and monstrous', which is peculiarly apt for the surrounding salt wetland, a haven for all manner of life. The Martians are eventually annihilated not by military manoeuvre, but by lack of immunity to terrestrial bacteria.

John drops me at Burnham and sails off again. After flitting round the cheery village and yachting marina I continue north, across the Dengie Peninsula. After Southminster the scape is flat, spears of wheat drooping over the reclaimed marshland. There's an extraordinary array of local and migrating birds, adding colour, motion and song to the scene. The recent spike of anti-European political views along the eastern coast jars with its natural history. For invaders landed on the Essex coastline for millennia, their small craft navigating its inlets and creeks, beaching onto an unknown island.

And Essex was made a haven for all of them, for they were us. Prehistoric peoples came from across Europe, who later stride onto the historical record as Celts, Belgae, Romans, Angles, Jutes and Saxons, Vikings, Normans, each settling on the island, farming and working it, leaving traces behind in names and buildings. Some fled religious persecution in the Netherlands and France, others fled poverty and hunger in Ireland, and there have been more recent economic migrations, from the Caribbean, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Kenya, and other parts of the former empire, which continue today. And just as they've made this island home, so islanders have sailed out again, settling in other parts of the world, like Canada, North America, New Zealand, Australia, South Africa. These too can be traced back through history, like 'Brittany', settled by Britons fleeing the Saxons and, later, Saxons fleeing the Normans in Byzantium, employed in its Varangian Guard.

These are uneasy, contested histories. But to insist on the virtues of migration against those bad English xenophobes who seek to quit the EU is lazy and inaccurate. These communities are tolerant, and often knowledgeable of their own recent histories. Their anger is not directed toward any migrant worker or European visitor, and racist violence is uncommon. There is a subtle element of class discrimination here. For they rage against their own political establishment, the narrow Westminster consensus that has allowed wages, infrastructure and local industries to collapse for the holy cause of private profit. Somehow the EU has been conflated with this, but the anger rarely sticks with that, the precise nature of its malevolence unclear.

There is also an antipathy toward the smug and sanctimonious middle classes, who condescend from their TV shows, lifestyle magazines and tabloid columns to correct the poor on their social priorities. Much of the mainstream Left finds itself in this policing role, sometimes unwittingly. The trade unions are bound and gagged by a thousand silken legal strings, and the remainder of the Left has drifted into the obsolescence of academia or futile party causes. There are these great swathes of anger without outlet, except the occasional anti-European candidate, until some gaffe reveals them as yet another cretinous establishment toady. They've kissed enough frogs round here. Migration is premised on dispersal. A vast group of the island's working class is migrating beyond the old political territories. There is no sign yet of where it will land. And that intrigues me.

Reaching the edge of the deserted rural peninsula, I follow a long trackway which terminates at a lofty stone barn overlooking the sea, site of St Peter on the Wall. Its interior is sober and grey, but its quiet ambience and sense of spatial and temporal remoteness are well-suited for reflective meditation. St Cedd established it in 654 CE, using the bricks from the nearby ruins of Othona,

an abandoned Roman fort that once repelled Saxon pirates. Three centuries later, the king of the East Saxons summoned Cedd from Lindisfarne to convert the local heathens to the Roman religion. He would die of some mysterious plague ten years after his mission, and according to Bede, paganism quickly returned to the marshes.

The one other structure impinging itself on the sparsely-populated Dengie Peninsula is Bradwell-on-Sea nuclear power station, its vast grey cuboids hulking over the flat scape more like a modern university than some Chernobyl-in-waiting, cutting an incongruous mark on the landscape. Inside the chapel, two local volunteers preparing flowers debate its ethics, one arguing that wind farms are too ugly, the other that they can be improved, and merit investment. Are national grid pylons and concrete cooling chimneys any better? They agree to disagree, in another ritual of island life, that of reaching consensus on dissensus, abandoning reason for the sake of social accord, a scepticism for pursuing intellectual causes. Such liberalism is as charming as it is maddening.

At work is an allusive ideal of Nature and the most natural. And even Dengie can trip one up, this nature actually intensively farmed, like most of England, its telegraph poles and tarmac roads over artificially reclaimed land. Being so flat, it is susceptible to flooding in places, and coastal erosion in others, its landness no matter of fact but a conditional truce. A sea-wall protects it, but the effects of inevitable climate change caused by human activity and consumption have, over this century, caused glaciers and polar ice-caps to melt, swelling the tides and submerging the eastern coast. 'Elemental change is accelerated here', says Jonathan Meades of the Essex littoral. Its fragility makes it exemplary, an 'emblem of human powerlessness'. Yet humans are things of nature too, the whole landscape human-shaped.

West, through the villages of St Lawrence, Steeple, Mayland and Mundon, and into Maldon, an old Saxon port-town still poised with graces over the Blackwater marshes. The rain is keeping up its armistice, and the early afternoon sun's delightful. A lone figure stands over the River Blackwater with a sword raised. Earl Byrhtnoth cuts a somewhat melancholic figure. The Battle of Maldon recounts the vain but heroic resistance of his English Saxons against a band of Viking raiders in 991 CE. It is one of the earliest English epic poems, and one of its finest. 'Courage shall grow keener, clearer the will, the heart fiercer, as our force faileth', has one translation. The Vikings sought a large tribute, 'danegeld', protection money, but Byrhtnoth refused. One could place him in a counter-history with Straw and Tyler, of rebels who fought for freedom against tremendous military power. But that wouldn't be quite right either. A large supermarket has beached beyond the banks.

This new level of exertion is fiendish, and some appetite has built up. My usual monastic fare of pitta bread and bananas is insufficient, and I order a large three-course meal in a Mexican restaurant to assuage the hunger. Like worn muscles, it's something else I'll get used to, usually through great bags of nuts and raisins and, later, muesli mixed with water. Some distance lies ahead.

Wickham Bishops and Great Totham, Tiptree and Layer de la Haye – the North Essex countryside is far prettier than its London-blurred southern parts. The moderate-sized city of

Colchester likewise wears an age and affluence of another order to its southern neighbours. Its centre is less distinct however. A cluster of generic malls linked by pedestrianised lanes, each offering a similar diet of chain stores. It is a British Town Centre, like any other. Though it gifts a university, I wonder if Essex's capital should be elsewhere. Perhaps it reflects the county's confused self-images. Fake tans and flat vowels of the outer London suburbs, kiss-me-kwik seaside shenanigans, the Real Nature along the marshes. Like all clichés, they are not untrue. But Essex is richer and stranger, and actively resists interpretation.

I lope around the gardens of its Norman castle, another totem of the island's contested histories. I wonder whether to ask the teenage lovers if they know all its histories, but lack that thick-skinned front also associated with Essex people and check Google. The castle's situated over the vast Roman temple to Claudius, the emperor who'd led the conquest of Britain in 43 CE, and was subsequently deified. The Romans made here, Camulodunum, their first capital, building a fortress and walls, theatres and a forum, and granted its citizens the same rights as Romans. But Claudius' imperial glory was founded on the military and economic subjugation of the Britannic tribes. Many had been forced into debts to their Roman lords to keep up with living costs, loans they couldn't repay. Few empires are conquered on the battlefield. Continual military campaigning had resulted in a number of atrocities, like the massacre of the druids at Anglesey in 60 CE, wiping out the cultural and spiritual elite of the Britons. Things were fermenting, ready to reach a head.

That same year, Boudica, chief of the Iceni tribe of modern-day Norfolk, had been dispossessed of her wealth by the Romans following the death of her indebted husband. Her daughters were raped by their soldiers. Allying with the Trinovantes of Suffolk, they marched to Camulodunum, left undefended, and burnt it down, before marching on London and St Albans, doing the same, in the process slaughtering around seventy- to eighty-thousand Romans and Britons. The rebels were finally routed by the smaller but better-armed legions at Watling Street.

Families picnic and teenagers dreamily gad about the castle. Who might the Iceni and Romans be substituted for now? Some stories are old, others remain hidden, unknown. The area has known other demotic, demagogic spasms. Witchfinder general Matthew Hopkins stirred up sufficient panic to oversee the execution of three hundred 'witches' over a short period between 1644–6 in Essex and nearby counties. Nothing's known of Boudica beyond the Roman chronicles. Then Normans, subjugating the rebellious populace. Walls and castles that brought order, a false pleasure in the fixity of history, the myth of a one-island nation story. The castle has been used as a prison for heretics, and is now a tourist attraction. I pedal out of Essex, exhausted and tantalised.

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'Just let nature get on with it', says Darren, the following morning, as we drink tea in his kitchen. Essex is behind me, and after Cattawade and Strutton, I reached Holbrook, Suffolk, a pretty

village dominated by the naval Royal Hospital School. Bedsheets and a warm shower had never felt more pleasurable.

I stayed with Darren and Sue, two strangers who kindly offered a bed via a friend. Sue's a teacher, and Darren a musician and ecologist, whose enlightening conversation indicates further inconsistencies about the island. For here is no fixed entity. The coastline is continually eroding in places and flooding in others. Why not work with nature, instead of fighting it? Epimethean pragmatism over Promethean ambitions. Darren and his colleagues are re-establishing salt marshes that will naturally inhibit floods. They are locating badger sets and, over the course of some years, vaccinating populations against bovine TB. Their approach is stewardship, not mastery.

But appealing for responsibility itself contains a kernel of moral optimism. Just as rising tides are beyond the control of humankind, so too is the restraint of our own natural behaviour. The industry and activity needed to feed and occupy an ever-growing population will continue to deplete and damage our environments. If nature means untouched by humankind, then it's hard to know where one might find it. Outside the towns, the terrain is drained and farmed, cut through with underground pipes, and webbed in roads and wires, from telephones to electricity pylons.

Hard to find is not proof of non-existence, however.

'[M]ost of England is 1,000 years old', wrote Hoskins in 1955. In a 'walk of a few miles one can touch nearly every century in that long stretch of time'. This is an old island, and with the exception of a few northern industrial towns, most settlements can trace such a lineage, often to villages established by Anglo-Saxon settlers, some settled by earlier Britons, others abandoned like the old Roman forts. The island was thinly populated when they arrived, much covered in oak and ash forests. This woodland has been burned since Neolithic times for fuel and for establishing new farmland. Being closest to the Continent, Norfolk and Suffolk became some of the most populous parts of the island, and the significance of migration is stored in the name 'Anglia'. These villages grew, and with them parish churches, castles, monasteries and towns.

But seeking this ancient England can be delusory. Over the River Orwell, I pedal into Ipswich, a large and neglected town. Schools and dilapidated community centres stand beside half-built luxury high-rises, clad in gaudy colours. Disused churches jut against a repetition of offices and mean suburban terraces, and a traffic-planning system confusingly weaves into a bland, predictable town centre. The streets reverberate with curses and discarded cans. Like Basildon, here is average British life, and its obvious ugliness functions to obfuscate easy interpretation. It is not an unhappy place.

Out along a busy A-road, next approaching Woodbridge, a twee market town. There is an obvious class difference with nearby Ipswich, for here is an organic farmers' market with unpasteurised cheese, artisan jams and craft beers, aspirational baby-clothing outlets, a haven for second home owners and wealthy professionals working in the nearby towns. The town makes a more blatant claim for a thousand-year lineage. And yet the market square, boutiques and

restored townhouses are as similarly contrived as Ipswich's urban incoherence, and therefore all the more authentic.

Most of these scapes bear the imprint of the last three centuries, in their Victorian terraces, their enclosed, hedgerowed farms established by private landowners and parliamentary enclosure over the 17th and 18th centuries, far larger in scale than the medieval smallholdings they replaced. 'Half a century ago, Norfolk might be termed a rabbit and rye country', wrote Arthur Young in 1804, without the wheat and barley since farmed on a massive scale. There is a danger in feeling nostalgia for a 'hand-made world', slow and wholesome, like that which was longingly fantasised about by Eric Gill, and intimated in the works of William Morris. Human beings are industrial creatures, putting the land to work to service our basic needs well beyond that thousand-year timeframe. It extends far back into pre-history.

Even reading the landscape isn't always instructive. Through Melton and Rendlesham Forest, signs warn of crossing frogs, and cyclists wave with a polite amiability unknown in London. It feels peaceful, old. Looking out from Orford over the gentle sea, the scenery gives the lie of permanence and fixity. But under those waters is a country that became an island that became sea, Doggerland.

Britain was a European peninsula until around 125-thousand years ago, when global warming caused glaciers to melt and seas to rise, creating an island. The fertile strip between East Anglia and the Continent was partially submerged, but remained the island of Doggerland until 5000 BCE, following the end of the most recent Ice Age. It was a place of human habitation, as well as a resting point through which migrating humans travelled on their way west to Britain. Antlers and bones are still being discovered from that drowned world, dredged by trawlers, but unlike Gilgamesh, Noah and Lyonesse, no myths survive of its peoples and cultures.

The rising tides continue to nip away at this coastline. Erosion at Pakefield, Happisburgh and Lynford on the East Anglian coast has revealed caves and ancient bones. The 2001–13 Ancient Human Occupation of Britain Project analysed these findings, estimating that humans have lived here for at least a million years. Among the oldest are stone tools and footprints matched to homo antecessoris at Happisburgh, indicating an ancient, natural ingenuity for working with our hands. Successive waves of humans have settled here since, but the island's climate has fluctuated from balmy Mediterranean-type conditions (the remains of hippo have been found in the Yorkshire Dales) to freezing tundra and desert permafrost, fit only for mammoth and deer. Climactic swings prevented lasting human settlement, wiping out the earlier homo heidelbergensis and neanderthalis and forcing migration again. The most recent occupation of the island by homo sapiens began 11,500 years ago, with the start of the Holocene era. Neolithic humans only started to settle and farm the land six thousand years ago.

So much for our thousand-year lineage. All this is merely a nano-second in the Earth's long history, and one that looks increasingly precarious. Geologists now term this the Anthropocene era. Ingenuity with our hands, and a versatile adaptability has caused the disappearance of forests, the loss of flood-regulating marshes, and the unleashing of chemicals that bored holes in the atmosphere. Ice-caps melt faster than scientific predictions, and by the end of the century it is

probable that, save another feat of human ingenuity, much of Norfolk, Suffolk, Essex and the Thames estuary will be underwater. It will be the latest event in a millennia-deep history of natural struggle.

One can imagine future humans navigating the wetlands of Ipswich and Basildon, wading through floating plastics, wires and polystyrene takeaway boxes, upended yachts and roof tiles, discovering a coin with a woman's face. An ancient nature goddess, they might think, as they fondly invent an image of the wholesome ways of the past.

Sea becomes one with the sky. We're beyond the zones of memory and forgetting now, caught between time-zones and their contradictory flows. A small vessel chugs over the drowned world towards a narrow spit, Orford Ness. Before Foulness, this flat expanse was used by the MOD for ballistic experiments with nuclear missiles, between 1949 and 1971. It's now a National Trust site, and one can peek around the cluster of huts from which the scientists worked, or drift down to the detonation points on the beach, a lonesome lighthouse to one's left, and two peculiar concrete huts in the distance that resemble pagodas, or possibly Neolithic cromlechs, covered tombs. There's a thrill in ignoring the Do Not Touch signs to cheekily prod two unexploded warheads. Then over the bone-like shingle where campion grows between metallic fragments, into the bomb-control centres that now home barn owls and butterflies. Time ceased around 1969.

This was the 'other island' for a long time, a place locals were afraid to name. I speak to a retired school teacher from South London who volunteers here. She shows me how to read a sea map (upside down) and with another old boy, helps me identify the principality of Sealand in the distance, an offshore military rig that now claims to be an independent state, with a population of one. Like Darren, she describes the bizarre and hidden military experiments conducted on the coastline, like at Shingle Street, where apocryphal stories of 'burning seas' and rebuffed German invasions during WW2 were likely produced as black propaganda to bolster morale. She talks of her late husband, lost at sea whilst sailing. The tranquillity of that sea is deceptive, with countless sunken ships lurking beneath cruel rocks.

Late afternoon, the rain returns in another vicious deluge. Turns out neither my jacket nor panniers are waterproof, and the ride is punishing. Another cyclist shoots a pained grimace and I give a thumbs up. His laughter keeps me pedalling. Soaked to the skin, I eventually reach Aldeburgh, a fetchingly fusty seaside town. There's an old moot hall by the sea, and the town was the first nationally to appoint a female mayor in 1908. A third of its properties are now second homes, largely owned by wealthy Londoners, who make up much of the well-heeled clientele of the Mill Inn, where I stop to dry out. Yet three hours on, the rain's beating down and I'm still drenched. I put it to the public vote.

The barman suggests cycling up the road a few miles and camping ('It'll be an adventure!'). An old boy chuckles and disagrees ('Stay here!'). I text Sarah for a deciding vote. There's a youth hostel in nearby Blaxhall. It's most tempting and I'm shattered, still no more adept at long days in the saddle. Out into the rain.

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Four days since leaving home, and fatigue's not yet abated. I appease it with excessive calorie consumption: packs of biscuits, chocolate milk where I can get it, gallons of beer. Yet for all the strain, I feel lighter and less burdened than ever before. It will take a few more days of rough going to articulate why.

Late morning, and I wind down narrow hedgerow-lanes that weave through fields and open country, among poppies and dozy cattle. It's a Constable scene, sweet and serene, dotted with the odd village pub, even a picturesque ruined abbey at Leighton. I plunge through the knotty Dunwich forest, where a quagmire claims my balance and splats me down, then reconnect with the coast.

The ruins of a medieval friary overlooking a wide bay hint at Dunwich's fate. One can handle the stones, all that remains of what was once East Anglia's most bustling sea-port and town, claimed by storms over the 13th and 14th centuries. Crooked medieval towers still poked through the sand until the late 19th century, and Dunwich was a notorious rotten borough, fielding two MPs to represent thirty-two voters. Now there are merely pebbles, and the tide, and a car-park and a large number of tourists. Brian Eno's 'Dunwich Beach, Autumn 1960' hints at the brooding menace and sense of loss that one can read into the bay, where even the graves are washed away.

'Memories lie slumbering within us for months and years', reflects W.G. Sebald in *Rings of Saturn*, a book as much about the East Anglian coastline as about the difficulties of remembering. These memories remain dormant, 'quietly proliferating, until they are woken by some trifle and in some strange way blind us to life'. Perhaps it's apt that since his move to the Suffolk coast, the cultural theorist Mark Fisher has written of 'the disappearance of the future' in British politics, 'eroded' in the defeat of a progressive working class modernism, overturned by Thatcher. Genteel Suffolk is a place of haunting, like these drowned worlds here, or the devilish black dog myths of local folklore in woods like Dunwich and Minsmere, or the ghost stories of M.R. James. Its age and placidity lends itself to horror.

Slumbering memories raise the question of agency: in what ways are our experiences buried, blinded from our sight? To what extent do we elect certain memories and stories to tell ourselves, and what values are employed in the selection process? These 'abandoned' zones like Dunwich and Orford Ness bustle with tourists. The wealthy second home towns of Woodbridge, Aldeburgh and Southwold ahead stake a claim to a wholesome tradition, 'unspoilt', offering food and drink that claims to be 'real', 'home-made', 'organic' and 'local'. There's a subtle eugenics in its folkly striving for authenticity and creativity, but then again the rich have always invented rituals to elevate their conspicuous consumption. This is the normative idyll to follow, 'Real Britain', this wealthy zone of South-East England. Nowhere shows football. Yet many of their residents had their first homes in the capital, and were pricing out locals, whilst places like Ipswich, Basildon and Yarmouth further along escape view, working class towns blighted with witless shopping centres, all alike, and numbers-driven mass housing. Beyond the sideshow about European integration, there was a far more expansive immigration of the moneyed middle

classes with their need for second homes. But at this point I'd read nothing about this, nor was there any immediately obvious explanation. In Ipswich and Basildon it was just struggles with rent, to buy a place, the struggle to get by. Like in Billericay, the household and the family remained the constrained locus of collective imaginings.

But cheery Lowestoft is a delight. Its old pier rusts precipitously over a sweeping bay. There's deck chairs and fish and chips, a funfair and a sign claiming to be the most easterly point of the island, and families lolloping about on the beach, bickering and laughing, enjoying themselves. I hear a local accent for the first time in Argos where I buy a poncho, its vowels clipped and light ('thang' you suh'). I'll hear more of it north, as I pedal through Gorleston and across a bridge into Great Yarmouth, an old fishing town with dusty quays at its rear, and a cheery seaside resort on the other side.

Yarmouth's the first lively town I've encountered since Southend, demotic and diverse. Yes there's the odd DWP-subsidised hostel, but there's also the wistful glamour of faded ballrooms and boarding houses, and far more amusements than one's inner child could wish for. I potter along the promenade, chatting to people on the beach. One group of sunburnt lads take a break from digging a huge hole with cool cans of lager. 'We're building the Alan Partridge hotel', says one, laughing.

This is now Norfolk, and the county difference is imperceptible. I head west over the Norfolk Broads, a flat expanse out of a Dutch postcard, all cattle, windmills and wee rills threading blues through the green. It's a hot afternoon and the road is choked with fast-moving traffic. An hour later, I reach Blofield, where I pause in one of the most common features of the terrain, a McDonald's drive-thru. They sell sameness: they look the same everywhere, serve the same range and quality of meals, are universally popular, and employ local people. With an ice-cream and milkshake, I find a place to charge my phone and rest a while.

When was the last time you were in a unique-looking pub or shopping centre? There is pleasure, indeed refuge, in being in a familiar, anonymising locale. The reality's constructed, it being so unlikely that one place could be exactly like another, but McDonald's, like the Tesco supermarket or Wetherspoon's pub, has achieved it. It appeals to a modesty in popular culture, a reluctance to indulge in unscripted self-expression and flamboyance. It reflects a desire for reassuring simplicity and convenience. One could not even dream of these places, they occupy no conscious space. Instead they are spaces for dreaming in, for being invisible and unconscious in. The golden arches offer a semblance of tradition and normality that seems homely, relaxing, even though such American cuisine was unknown here even fifty years ago. Queuing for another milkshake, I find optimism in the place. If we can adapt to this consumer modernism and indeed be lovin' it, without self-reproach, then what else is possible for an egalitarian, democratic politics, hidden in the depressed contemporary moment? What else might we desire?

It's a tenuous point, but the proximity of alternate time-zones, like Orford Ness, Doggerland and Dunwich, facilitates speculative dreaming. I continue west, bypassing Norwich and cutting through the dusky forests at Swardeston. It's now nightfall. The forests are thick, the thin trees and foliage casting a wall of black over which the zaffre-blue of the night sky looms like a

cathedral vault. A black dog appears in front of me on the unlit road. Local legend has it that on quiet roads like this, such a dog is the devil in disguise. Its bark is unnerving.

I ride around it, increasing speed, but one narrow road follows another, each threading nowhere, the woodland scene interrupted by derelict barns and abandoned-looking cottages. Mice skitter over the path. For a time I cannot make out the road ahead. The wind picks up, and I hear a woman's voice singing, as if just behind my shoulder. I turn round, but there's no-one there, the scene deserted, save for the black trees and moths, and mice, and that devil dog somewhere on my tail. Feeling a little terrified, I pedal with everything I've got until the woods are behind me, and I find myself in the old market town of Wymondham.

Happy drunks gallivant over the market lanes, and pubs blare out reassuringly bland indie-rock. Relief. But it's late, and I've nowhere to sleep. After skirting around the town, I spot signs for a playing field, and pitch up behind some play-centre.

It's my second attempt at wild-camping in England, an illegal practice, and this attempt is no more successful than the first. I hear a gaggle of teenagers marauding in the distance. Nervous of my vulnerability, I chance on barbed psychology, and venture out to greet them.

'Don't worry, I'm not a ghost!'

They scarper past shrieking, terrified by a moonlit, lunatic spectre.

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'There is no antidote against the Opium of time, which temporally considereth all things', writes Thomas Browne, doctor and dilettantish genius of Norwich. 'Our Fathers finde their graves in our short memories... Generations passe while some trees stand, and old Families last not three Oaks.'

His Urne-Buriall is a beautiful meditation on the brevity of life's 'pure flame' and his hopes for the Christian afterlife, written in 1658 as a study of urns recently discovered in Walsingham. His melancholy words also pass verdict on another local story, Kett's rebellion, which began at an oak tree on Mousehold Heath back in 1549.

Wealthy gentry had begun building fences and digging ditches around common land, enclosing public spaces for their own private profit. They were increasing rents and cutting wages. The aggrieved commons gathered, and decided to tear down the fences that local landlord, Robert Kett, had placed over the common land at Wymondham. After pleading with them, Kett took the unlikely decision to lead the rebels. They tore down his neighbour's fences, then marched towards Norwich, where they established a peaceful protest camp at Mousehold Heath, just as rebellious peasants had done previously in 1381.

Thousands gathered there by the day, and at other camps across East Anglia. One can only speculate on the energy of their discussions and optimism. After six weeks, the rebels sent 29

grievances to the Lord Protector Edward Seymour, acting effectively as monarch in lieu of the boy-king Edward VI. They demanded a return to fairer prices and rents, for fair and equitable local government, that the common land should not be privatised by landowners. '[N]o lord of no manor shall common upon the common.'

There was something of the Peasants' Revolt's naïve association of the interest of the 'trew commons' with that of the monarch. Kett and the rebels saw themselves as loyal subjects of the King, and demanded only the removal of a few corrupt members of the gentry.

The protest camp was declared a rebellion, and warrants made for the leaders' arrest. Needing food and sensing the need for escalation, the rebels seized the city, but lacked a lasting strategy. They managed to defeat a better-armed royal army inside Norwich several times, but were later outgunned outside it by a second force of European mercenaries. Kett was captured and hung from Norwich castle. A plaque on its walls remembers him as a 'noble and courageous leader in the long struggle of the common people of England to escape from a servile life into the freedom of just conditions'. The plaque was raised by the citizens of Norwich in 1949, not long after the victory against fascism. They were like seeds, these struggles, alive beneath one's feet.

Norwich is a small, old city, marked out by its affluent suburbia and, after rings of confusing traffic systems, the imposing cube form and battlements of a Norman castle and cathedral, each cut from piercing white limestone. Unlike much of England, the traditional bastions of power still dominate the horizon. The town is more modern though residually quaint and compact. Hitler planned to give his first post-invasion speech from here. One wonders how Norwich, with its long rebellious history, would've tolerated such rule.

North, along the Marriot's Way cycle track. It's a cheery morning, and the old train line's flanked by bluebells and cowparsley, butterflies and swallows, hikers and cyclists out for the day. I feel much lighter along the path, and after a few hours I pass Reepham, and cycle into Foxley Wood, Norfolk's largest remaining ancient forest. I wander in and chart a path between thick grasses, immersing in lush springy trees. I go to celebrate with a KitKat, when I notice something quite disturbing.

At the back of the bicycle is one pannier, not two. This one contains smelly clothes and a washbag, whilst the other contained my laptop and valuables.

Where has it gone? I've cycled around thirty miles since leaving Wymondham, and the bag could've fallen anywhere along that route. But what route? I can hardly remember what way I came. The bag has no name-tag or obvious marker. Whoever finds it will look inside and be tempted by its contents. What if it's back in Norwich, the police probing it as a suspect package, ready to detonate? The possibilities are terrifying. I race back towards Norwich, asking everyone I pass if they've spotted a bag.

A family of cyclists at Reepham saw one of the plastic hooks on a path nearby, but no bag. My heartbeat doubles, and desperation surges as blank expressions and replies in the negative keep coming. After another mile, an old cyclist thinks he saw it seven miles ago at a car-park in Norwich. For the next hour and a half I ride back towards Norwich, asking everyone I pass,

popping into local cafes and calling up others. A walker remembers spotting it on the bicycle somewhere along the path. It has to be here somewhere along the shrubby verge, but there's no sign of it.

At the edge of Norwich, I pause in a car-park. A man hails me from his car. 'Something's trailing off your bike' he says, pointing to the sleeping bag hanging off. I explain my situation. He beckons me over to his boot, where lo it is there! Russell has waited around two hours after picking it up, whilst out for a walk. He was about to leave when I'd appeared. He insists on not taking any reward for his goodwill and patience. Thank you Russell!

From despair to dizziness. The sun is baking hot and I feel faint and exhausted, as if on the rotating plate of a microwave. I cut my fingers badly whilst trying to fix the bag back on, and have difficulty focusing on the road ahead. It's another fifteen miles back to Reepham, and it's late afternoon. Every thirty seconds I turn round to check the bag's still attached.

After an exhausting couple of hours I reach the shrine of Our Lady of Walsingham. A small grey chapel sits surrounded by undulating country fields and flooded groves where children lark. It was once 'England's Nazareth', a popular destination for medieval pilgrims who were too ill or poor to afford the dangerous journey to Jerusalem, its location inspired by the appearance of Mary in the vision of an 11th century noblewoman. During the English Reformation her statue was taken to London and burnt. Catholicism would remain illegal and suppressed until its 'emancipation' in 1829. The church was built in 1897, but its cramped dark interior, with countless glowing candles, still possesses something of the mysterious and unworldly, the flickering flames emitting a sound and heat like the interior of a cramped train clattering through a tunnel.

In the deserted chapel, I kneel down and make a prayer, appealing to whichever deities have the unlikely property of existence. I thank the generosity of strangers, and pray for the wellbeing of loved ones at home. Hope wells up inside me as I clamber up and shuffle out of the chapel. I feel unburdened of that exhaustion, ready to submit to the arbitrary chance of the road.

Out, along bright burnished fields of wheat, and into the town of Little Walsingham, marked by its number of hospices and gaggles of cardinals and bishops, waving pints of beer and laughing outside the Bull Inn. This old religion, Catholicism, was once the glue of disparate communities of Britons and Romans, Angles, Saxons and Jutes, Danes and Normans, providing a shared worldview and system of beliefs. Monasteries preserved and transmitted a literary and artistic culture, and few modern architects have matched the majesty and awe of a gothic cathedral like Norwich's. It may be illusory, but so what? The veracity of the material world isn't what's at stake, but the ability to find inner resources to summon courage and hope within suffering, to remain resilient. I wonder if modern times have matched the ancient promise of baptism, rebirth and redemption. Norfolk is a curiously apt place for it. There are more medieval churches concentrated here than anywhere else in Europe.

Wells, a sedate harbour town on the North Norfolk coastline. Families pick crabs with buckets and nets. I ask one dad and his daughter what they'll do with the creatures, wrestling at the bottom of a plastic container. 'They're not for eating', he chuckles. In the distance, sailboats jut

and jangle in the breeze, and I stand beside a fisherman awhile, both of us idly contemplating the seas.

My body feels exhausted and weighty, like a heavy ill-fitting outer garment. Inside, my mind feels elated, live-wired into the terrain. Outer layers, hardened, cynical and jaded, are being peeled away like the skin of an onion, revealing a fresher way of seeing and feeling, ready for the new.

Kleep kleep! Oystercatchers glide west over the horizon, across marram dunes, to Scolt Head Island. With the last of my strength, I follow their guide.

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Once upon a time, a boy went down to the beach and began to dig a hole. He began early in the morning with just a plastic spade, but his energy was indefatigable, for his goal was to tunnel through to the other side of the world. Australia, China, Zimbabwe, somewhere like that. By early afternoon he was several metres deep under the sands. His mother called him, but there was no reply. The sands shifted, the sea sighed, and the tunnel collapsed. The boy was eventually found, suffocated. It was not known whether he'd caught a glimpse of the other side shortly before his death.

It happened not long before I'd first come to Hunstanton, as a small child on a family holiday. I remember the boys who'd dig pits and throw crabs in for entertainment, their pincers manically clawing at one another. The difference between life and death seemed casual and indiscriminate. But I can find no sign of the boy now, nor can anyone recall him, and I wonder if it was a figment of my imagination.

Morning, and I am pushing the bicycle along a deserted promenade, assailed by great white sheets of rain. The funfair is closed up. Macabre clown faces leer from a ghost-house, beside a helter-skelter and a lonesome waltzer, signs warning of CCTV cameras and the dangers of leaving out hands. The scene is unattended and abandoned. A small tattooist kiosk is the one thing open, the walls offering an array of flash and tribal artwork. I think of Tucker's lament, and press on.

I reached this purpose-built Victorian seaside resort late last night. It is uniquely situated on an east-coast promontory that faces west, thereby exposed to beautiful sunrises and sunsets, like the one me and another man, standing beside his car, marvelled at last night. 'Truly extraordinary', he'd agreed. Rains were forecast, and I'd checked into a youth hostel run by a gregarious young family. This morning I awoke exhausted, unable to move my legs without pain. The rain was already lashing down. A day of rest was called for.

Fierce gales buffet the seafront. I join another couple of hikers hunkering behind a closed cockle stall, shielded from the barrage. Then past deserted grease tea caffs, where Morrissey's 'Everyday is Like a Sunday' plays to no-one. Among the shingle beneath the cliffs one can find

shark teeth, I've been told, but I forage ineffectually and move back into the town, past various tatty chippies, charity shops, anglers' grottos and 'Britain's biggest joke shop'. The unsavoury weather's having the greater laugh. Even the local sea-life centre had been knocked out by recent floods. 'English weather!' a lady chuckles.

After a good lunch and conversation in a misplaced Wells Deli, I post my broken pannier home. At Fatbirds bikes I acquire another by Altura at a good price, and my mudguard, broken by yesterday's rigmarole, is repaired without charge. Defeated by the rain, I return to the hostel, where the news relays a predictable series of terrifying and misleading headlines. I root through the books.

Three years after the outbreak of the French Revolution, Admiral Nelson wrote to the Duke of Clarence about the conditions of labourers in this part of rural Norfolk. 'They are really in want of everything to make life comfortable', he writes, and '[drink] nothing but water'.

Between 1780 and 1830 the local population doubled. The enclosure of common land by profiteers, a series of bad harvests, rising rents, inflated Corn Law prices and growing unemployment finally led to the Swing Riots across Norfolk and the South-East in 1830. Wealthy farmers employed labourers on insecure short-term contracts, often paying poverty wages. Poor Law payments, whose modern equivalent is the dole, were being cut, and many unemployed labourers were being shunted into punitive workhouses. Destitute, desperate, and with no other political outlet, the labourers started rioting over wages, wrote threatening letters to landowners and magistrates under the pseudonym Captain Swing, burnt down tithe barns (a tenth of a farm's produce was still given to the Church), attacked workhouses, and destroyed threshing machines, usually on Saturday nights after the pubs closed.

Nelson's unheeded warning is worded in ways reminiscent of John Ball, during the Peasants' Revolt. He complained that the gentry had 'wines, spices, and fine bread, when we have only rye and the refuse of straw; and if we drink, it must be water'. Like the assembled commons, and the labourers around Kett, their demands were not especially modern or new. They harked back to the old, they demanded a restitution of lost rights. Some, like Ball, used religion to hark back to a natural equality before God, Eden-like, which called into being a mythic prehistory.

In contesting the present, they restaged the past, resourcefully drawing out myths and stories to recommon the commons, to present a counter common-sense. This had also been the case for the Magna Carta, whose constitutional importance primarily stemmed from its early 17th century repurposing by English parliamentarians. The rights of the commons had begun as a declarative demand and imposition, and were then secured through common law. The riots eventually died down, with hundreds of labourers either being executed or transported overseas, later followed by the East End drunks of Hadleigh Colony. Once populous, the Norfolk countryside depopulated as families migrated to the new industries of the Midlands, or overseas.

The sleepy villages and hedgerows of the Burnhams along the coastline are now wealthy second home terrain, respite of bankers, advertisers and property speculators, offering the ruse of unopposed traditional gentility. Profiting from the privatisation of public goods or preaching, like medieval clergy, the godliness of free markets, they are part of a modern enclosure of the

commons. For more than two centuries now, the island remains a 'family with the wrong members in control', as George Orwell put it, dominated by a parasitic rich 'less useful to society than his fleas are to a dog'.

But nothing suggests that the other family members would do anything constructive about it. The Swing rioters, like Kett or the trew commons, rose up without an alternative political and economic model. They believed that the king would side with them in rooting out a few bad apples and offering a few piecemeal reforms. They invested too much confidence in their leaders and not enough in themselves, and against every popular instinct, were led to believe that in politics, reason prevails. A peculiar fatalism now chokes the island, steeped in centuries-deep disappointment. It requires a deeper reading.

Early evening now. A plastic fork is insufficient to pierce these rubbery chips, but at least Mat's conversation is more consoling, as I dine in a kebab shop. The Q in QFC stands for Questionable. Eight years since leaving Turkey, he mulls returning. Into the Golden Lion, Hunstanton's not-so-old oldest pub. The bartender talks of the difficulty of affording to live in the area. Round here, the Burnhams are nicknamed 'Chelsea-on-Sea'. 'What can you do?' he asks rhetorically. I suggest a major social house-building programme, along conventional Keynesian lines. 'Who would pay?' I suggest closing tax loopholes and increasing taxes on wealthy corporations and individuals, and he laughs, and gives me a knowing look.

I drift back down along the quiet promenade and into a deserted amusement arcade, still improbably open at this hour. A platoon of bow-tied youth polish screens of penny machines with looks of glum dejection. The Sex Pistols' 'Pretty Vacant' blares from all corners of the chamber, and combines with the flashing fruit machines into an overwhelming sensory attack. The scene contains in miniature all the contradictions of the island.

The pubs are deserted, and the only drinkers seem to be off-duty staff, evidence of a peculiar kind of unproductive, reciprocal local economy straight out of a Magnus Mills' novel. In another empty seaside boozier, staff curse as they play video games on phones, and the Rolling Stones filter over a scene of solitary tipplers. Meandering back to the hostel, I stop for one last nightcap in the Old Marine Bar, which is neither old nor has any obvious relation to the sea, being some distance from it.

Inside I talk with Sean, a Londoner whose life has taken him everywhere. He's roadied for The Prodigy ('good people') and Richard Ashcroft, and later Coldplay and McFly. Sound-checks for the latter were ear-splittingly painful. He travelled the world between tours, spending the money he made. After caring for his ill father he came here, to the sea, seeking escape. We laugh a lot and talk until late, trading stories. 'The fish change with the months', he says, bass, mackerel and sharks migrating here in the summer, replacing cod and rays. Migration's natural, he adds. But 'Nature' has little bearing on the imagination and desires of humankind. Nothing adds up.