

BEN REED

*After Landing at Heathrow International, One
Week After the Bombs (14 July 2005)*

STILL DRUNK ON DUTY-FREE WHISKEY FINISHED SOMEWHERE OVER the Atlantic, my gathering hangover and I lug our suitcase onto the uncrowded Underground, toward Shoreditch, smuggling safely into dewy English dawn.

The train is vectored on central London, the only other passengers three young men—bankers—fashionable and handsome and already minor titans of finance, perfectly coiffed and dressed to a silk fault in pink shirts and pink ties and wool suits as gray grey as our Thursday ~~mourning~~ morning, Barclays, Lloyds, HSBC. They are composites of cheekbones and clefted chin, and what they say without speaking is that I should have majored in economics. Their attachés pulse symmetrically next to polished brogues the color of terra cotta roof tiles. These men wage jihad on my self-esteem, pausing to smile at my travel-heavy face and my dented American suitcase, white iPod headphones jacked into their ears.

Oh, their hair! Their hair! I would self-detonate for their hair!

I look away. There's always the Cockfostering map to consider. Hammersmith, Gloucester, Hyde Park Corner. Saint Pancreas and my rising bile. I pretend to ponder the horizon, the mossy suburbs flying past. I spy down into overgrown gardens, familiar domains even in a foreign country. I realize I am no longer young; I was never handsome and I will not be successful; I think my armpits stink. Holes have been torn into London, but for a moment, the bombs are forgotten.

At noon two minutes of silence will flood across the continent, but right now on the train a woman's dulcet voice spreads like diazepam gas from hidden speakers, telling us which stations have been closed and which lines have been cut, but I cannot hear; the smell of hair gel is deafening.