**Buried Rivers**

*London’s ‘lost’ rivers were bricked over, like flows of guilt which had to be concealed from public view … Enchantment is bought in the burying alive of great waters, yet the purchase may be a perilous one. [[1]](#footnote-1)*

*The id cannot say what it wants; it has achieved no unified will. Eros and the death instinct struggle within it.[[2]](#footnote-2)*

1.

Ghosts don’t keep to visiting hours. Memory loosens

in the waterlogged earth, but death’s no excuse

for bad manners. Doctors haunt the rooms, swap

prognoses over coffee, keep running tallies

of new symptoms and services rendered. Murmurs

seep from the walls of Silver Birch Ward.

2.

On days of unescorted leave, I trail

a familiar mutt down the backways of London,

tracing the routes of its buried rivers

– Earl’s Sluice, Black Ditch, Bollo’s Brook,

Westbourne, Tyburn, Counter’s Creek – along residential streets,

under office buildings, and out into parks

where lithe gazelles dose themselves with sun

and the dog strains at its chain.

On treatment days,

I watch from the ECT suite, as Farah paces

the fenced garden of Cherrytree Ward. He speaks

the poisoned words this country gave him

to a picture of himself as a boy. Last night's meds

weigh on him, but he’s not slept well

since the angel of death made a gash in the clouds

so God could watch him. He pauses, listens

to the Effra’s hissed obscenities, drifting

from its buried course past the Maudsley building.

3.

*He is, where I am not. Rising at night*

*from the culverted Fleet, my uncouth brother*

*roves Square Mile in a soiled coat –*

*outraging the lovers and business prospects*

*I work all day to court.*

4.

An instructive hour with Priestess Estelle,

*Trainee Sexologist, Queen of the Cards* –

in an attic room, above a vegan café,

she told me the source of my *grumpy soul.*

*The waters to quench you are buried;*

*they run in the dark.* I remember the smell

of potpourri and a hint of damp

when I passed my money over.

5.

*in a flat on Angel Way*

*your old man works all day to drain*

*the bottles by his bed*

*but when he sleeps the River Rom*

*floods his room and fills again*

*the bottles by his bed*

6.

Since coming home, I pass the time

with Sudoku and self-help podcasts.

I keep busy, and work hard to stay

as distant from myself as possible.

Everyone seems satisfied with my progress.

And it’s only in a few gnawed hours

– when the unabashed shapes

of daylight blur, and the air grows close

with voices – that I drift again down buried rivers,

through filth-clogged culverts, past sewage works,

until I reach the sea.

1. Peter Ackroyd, *London: The Biography* [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Sigmund Freud, *The Ego and the Id* [↑](#footnote-ref-2)