

## *Lights On A Darkening Shore*

8am, Friday morning. Up past Lambeth Bridge and through Archbishop's Park, a shot of espresso sandblasts the senses and -

Now, as you rise - weightless, oddly hushed - up through the still lifting haze - small lives implode and drop away, until - glass-capsuled, high in a sundrenched sky, with Waterloo station spayed out below like a wrecked rusty fan on a flattened waste of dust, discarded streets - and the rest of London just beyond, and the rest of the world just beyond that - you're thinking: *this* is why I do this... because I love feeling like this...

Shinkansen Recordings. *Abba On The Jukebox* was our debut, a list of happy moments recollected in numbed confusion, each somehow imbued with melancholic foreboding - it still haunts, still triggers those freefalling heartbeats. The press-release said simply: *a song about endings* - what else could it say? That *Abba* always reminds me of the M6, of driving up to Manchester for the Radcliffe Session, and of how much I hate motorways - except for the sky, of course - the carefree entanglements of Spaghetti Junction, or the car-free chalk sculpture dazzle of Twyford Down - or from below - the Westway, tipping out over the Grand Union at Westbourne Park, the canal a black slick sulking in its shadow, even on the brightest day? Of course not, that all came later...

Dusk falls across the city, lights come on along the river -

The best view of The Wheel is from the drab chasm of Westminster Bridge Road - for years just a dark angry snarl of traffic raging up from the Elephant (and passing, oblivious, the site of the former Necropolis station, from where Lambeth's dead were once ferried in black-suited, soot-blackened, steam-palled trains to the air, space and soil of the Surrey hills), but now there's a white arc scorched through the blue above the railway-bridge - The Wheel, pinned on its spindle, a giant's top or river-top fan poised to blast the heat from the simmering streets of London's last apocalyptic summer -

"Shinkansen" - it's the Japanese intercity express, what we call the Bullet Train: though the straight translation, more prosaic, is simply "new trunk line". There's one on the back cover - on the right, on the fencepost; on the *left* is the 11.10 to London Bridge via Peckham Rye - less punctual, less svelte and altogether less likely to return covered in cherry-blossom, but you still can't beat the ride along Bermondsey viaduct, looking out over the rooftops to the

ghost-shipped wharves of Lavender, Russia and Greenland Docks. Or the garret-shaking District Line, eavesdropping its way from Hammersmith to Chiswick. Or the DLR to Beckton. Or changing trains in the snow at Pfronten-Steinach, halfway up a mountain on the Austro-German border, two hours out of Munich with the snow-line already crossed a dozen times from green to white to green and back -

From the window of this office, which is also our bedroom, I can see the unexploded tower-blocks on Kennington Road, two horses, the M16 HQ, the tourist-trip balloon tethered on the site of the old Vauxhall Pleasure Gardens (1660-1859) and the last concrete outcrops of Lambeth Walk shopping-precinct being smashed into rubble. I love all this. I love also Southwark station, snowflakes, Socialism, Alasdair Gray, St.Saviour's Dock footbridge and Massachusetts when it's late at night, even though I've never been. You probably do too - you've bought this, after all.

And I'm trusting the off-guard glimpse of a distant, lit-up City from the top-deck of a 159 racing down Brixton Hill charges you with the same moment-melting urge to kiss strangers that hearing, say, *Smile Again* for the first time did - lights-out, tucked-up under the bedclothes, in the bed of someone stranger and more wonderful than you'd ever dared hope - because then you'll already know why I'm refusing to list here numbers, formats or pressing-quantities, just like you'll know whether to be scared, thrilled or bewildered when the conductor, handing you your change, bends low and whispers that talk at the depot these days is all of how we're each of us made from nothing but the dusty insides of long-dead stars.

Anyway: I was down by the river at Battersea, the landing-slip by the church (Saxon, rebuilt 1777, now a poor shrinking mute under the vast glass gaze of the Montevetro apartment-block), musing on change, entropy, the probable irreversibility of Time and whether the Universe is really planning on a lonely cold dark suicide - and if so whether Science should quit being so blindly objective and start trying to talk it round - when a couple of Canada Geese splashing about in the flotsam at the water's edge caught my attention.

Luckily, I had both a camera and a keen eye for the more gawky and awkwardly beautiful manifestations of the pop sensibility readily to hand.

*Vauxhall, May 2000*