The Rising of the Rom

1.

*Cry me a river,* sang my home town, and God cried us the Rom. A snivel of a thing, so low and carved into the dirt of London that the dirt swallowed it. Maps traced where it dove underground, jinking to duck the clomp of concrete, but the kid I was knew just one place to glimpse it—or a nettled runnel of it, five feet across—that surfaced from under an elbow of North Street, sun-gurgled some three yards, then slunk away into a dark of trash trees. They were nothing you could call woods, or even a copse, you understand, just whatever greenery could thrust up from the banked mud between two commercial buildings.

*Roomy ford*, the name *Romford* meant once, back when the river running through it was called the Beam. It's a tributary of the Thames. The Romans, I learned from a reading of *Claudius The God*, came, saw, and forded it. In the ensuing centuries, it became so roomy that there was eventually no river left. A suburb of 120,000 Londoners has set up camp on its sediment.

I left their number long ago. But you *can* go home again. I return there and it is.

2.

Before the Brexit vote, in that creepy way the internet has of nosing at the secret heart of us,

reports out of Romford roistered through my feed.

*Is this the most pro-Leave place in England?*

Camera crews in the town center—at the gates of St. Edward’s Church; among the open air market stalls—found faces and voices to support the claim.

And then on the plebiscite's eve, Romford flooded.

The Rom burst its banks and took to the streets.

Who had ever seen such a thing? Main roads and the train station closed; even the trim gardens

of my mother's cul-de-sac were bubbled and rinsed with a mud-mucked battle-cry of water.

3.

Ann, our long-time neighbor—she cut my kiddie hair, and I'm in my sixties—accompanied my mother to the polls. The streets, by then, were passable. The roused animal of the Rom had looked about and slashed about, scrawling its sludge graffiti, and sunk back under to its bed.

Ann, pro-Leave and knowing my mother was not, snatched at her friend's ballot, to cast her vote the way she felt it should be cast. Mum—91, still feisty—fought her off, flapping her hands up out from under till the pair of them salvaged an irritable joke from it. They made their separate choices; they grumbled; they stayed friends.

And by my July visit, the streets, too, were back to normal. Walking her into town down North Street, I pointed out where the river rises, where that day it had risen, its watermark on the wall. My mother said, *That's the Rom?* She had never noticed! Well, why would one? And it had somehow done…that? We stood, paying our flummoxed respects.

4.

Sometimes, when I’m back home in Virginia, home is only mostly Romford. The first two times I left there, I came back: from college, then a few years later from France. But in France I had met and married an American girl, and after eight months in London, she told me, *I'm going home, Derek—are you coming?* So I came to Virginia, and this time I stayed gone. As had to be the case for one of us, *home* became somewhere I no longer lived.

And gradually, all my friends from Romford or its environs departed too, as did, without regret, almost all my family. "That ghastly place," as one of my siblings put it. Only my parents remained, still ensconced in the house I grew up in, until in December 2014, my father died.

My mother, who had claimed for decades that she wanted to be elsewhere, dithered and dallied for two years, until at last she consented to be moved to a retirement facility in Eastbourne, a short drive away from my sister. That post-flood July visit home was to be my last.

I was astonished by how distraught it left me: this realization I would never be back.

5.

We moved to Romford when I was six. I was born in Cape Town, South Africa, in 1949, the year after the Afrikaners came to power, and their Herenigde Nasionale Party began to pass the series of laws that institutionalized the system of apartheid. My family is what is called Coloured, or generationally mixed race. Throughout the 1950s, South Africa was still a member of the British Commonwealth, and Commonwealth citizens still had the right of abode in the United Kingdom. The writing was covering the wall. We abandoned everything. We fled.

American for many years now, I have found some of my current countrymen puzzled by my dismay over the Brexit vote; what difference, really, can it make to me? And really, I can't easily explain. But I try to tell how hard it was to become British back them, how exclusive the term once seemed—what a relief it was to see that first wave of multiracials who arrived with us slowly, genuinely be accepted—or so I felt—and now, how the anger and exasperation at this second wave, the Eastern Europeans and the refugees out of North Africa in particular, appeared to be refueling the old bigotries we had fled from. (And soon, in post-war England, in milder, less institutional form, found we had fled to.) Romford was absolutely my hometown, but could I truly be English? British, a broader term, I was beginning, at last, to claim. European, that still broader one? It was while I was living in France that the U.K. joined the Common Market, and honestly, I felt encompassed by the change. It felt more than exhilarating; it felt properly natural. A world large enough to let me pass, unfettered, between the places I loved? Imagine that! I share a birthday with John Lennon. Why shouldn’t it be easy, if we tried?

But then I remember that in 1956, when we arrived in Romford, there was still a town crier roaming the town center on market days, pealing his bell and proclaiming the local news. There's been a Romford market since the 13th century, and in 1956, not only were there cheap clothes and trinkets and good fruit and vegetables for sale, but you could still buy genuine livestock—which seems unimaginable among the tech hucksters of today. It's not hard to feel sympathy for those who balk at the pace of change.

6.

Today, I took a walk (as I often do) along the James River, in my other home town of 40 years, which is Richmond, Virginia. Maybe, with the loss of my parental base in Romford, in the wake of Brexit, I'm at last shifting which home town is primary. We'll see. I love this lovely, messily evolving city. The day was grey; I saw (this is very rare) not a single heron, or egret, or bald eagle, or double crested cormorant; but along the Pipeline Trail, which runs beside the rocky shore of Brown's Island in the heart of downtown, the views were, as always, magnificent, and the river itself was mighty. No little tributary this, but a place of wonder. I crossed from its south bank to its north bank and back again, meandering home along through parklands and wetlands and a splendor of rapids. On Belle Isle, there was once an infamous Confederate prisoner of war camp; I strolled through meadows where far too many Americans fighting to confront the racial inequities of 150 years ago sickened and died.

Everywhere, in every age, it seems, the same struggle, the same jostle and judder forward, into the next age, onto the next struggle.

7.

*That's the Rom?* says my mother. She had never noticed! *Well,* I say, *there it is!*

And so we paid it our respects, and we bid it goodbye—and soon afterward, each in our turn, bid Romford goodbye with it.

I sift through today’s photographs. Nothing much, nothing that captures the heart-tug of it.

Here's to your own sweet river, my friends, my fellow citizens of the world. Here's to its snuffle, to the sly, thick jink and slink of it, into the dappled dark.