

Stephen Robertson

Peckham 1969—1991

Of eighteen sixty vintage, the house is flat
in face, no sign of the deep bay windows that
adorn most later London terraced fronts.
One of a block of four, it had been once—
but they had filled the gap to make a join
with the neighbouring block, leaving a row of nine.

In nineteen sixty nine the house was lit
by gas, with open fires the only heat.
The lino on the hall floor had been laid
in nineteen thirty three, the newsprint said.
The previous occupant, known as Mister Gray,
(easier than his proper name of Gouriet)
had come as a child sixty-odd years before
(well before the start of the first world war).

Fifty yards across the park at the back
a low embankment carries the railway track.
(Down the slope to the end of the street and right,
the line bridges over the road.) Sometimes at night,
a heavy goods train rattles the windows and plates
on the shelves. Later, the local rumour states
that the train is carrying nuclear waste; at the time
it is just the timing that disturbs. The line
mostly carries suburban trains; more rarely,
carriages decked in the blue and gold livery
of the Compagnie Internationale des Wagons-Lits
et des Grands Express Européens pass by.

In the end, it was the railway
that contrived to send us on our way.
British Rail announced that it would sink
a hole to build the Channel Tunnel link.
A monstrous hole, quite big enough to eat
the park and all the houses down the street.

We joined the local protest, but to small effect. At last we felt we had to call a halt to worry, and agreed to sell for demolition, move to Camberwell. (Two weeks later, British Rail's plans were scrapped and redesigned. The house still stands.)