

Rebirth in Brixton

By Mia Juratovac

They splash through the slums of the city, the man and his foreman, who speaks shoddy English but knows the spaces here like they were gaps within his own body. Boots stained with street muck, they slide through the channels, arteries and veins, past the workers feeding the fires of Brixton, past women and children pouring out of factories, coughing through dusty mouths. They step quickly past, choosing muddy alleyways over main roads, slogging ever closer to the center where the fires from the bombing still smolder.

The old red brick building was surrounded by wires leading into and over it. Its ragged rafters rose above the buildings that have fallen apart around it, jabbing at the sky, as if to protect its remaining walls. Like a ribcage, he thinks, ruddy face gleaming. The foreman has gone ahead; he turns, and beckons him on.

Rotted floorboards creak warnings, walls and beams shift with the slightest breath. They cannot tell where the damage from the bombs ends, and where the effect of gravity alone begins. He catalogues everything, tallies here and there, deciding whether the whole structure must come down. Surely they can salvage something.

In the center of the room, where all the walls have fallen, a mound of rubble rises, wet from the fire hoses' vain efforts. Close by, amongst the glint of scrap metal, and in the midst of blackened rafters, they find a living form. At first they think she is dead. The foreman reaches for her gold necklace, and jerks back as she bursts into a fit of coughs.

Now they can see how her chest moves as if with the swaying walls, pushing in out in out, clouds of brick dust settling and lining the many creases in her face. She is frail and dirty, bleeding from something under her many layers that they cannot see or easily get to.

As they stand there, her eyes open, reddened slits. Her mouth curls into a smile. "Are you here for me?" she asks them, voice thin over the complainings of the building. The foreman drops to his knees and starts to pray. She laughs weakly. "It's too late now. Let me go." Her eyes close again. Her body relaxes, though her breathing doesn't stop for minutes. When it does, there is a crash from somewhere behind them. A sparrow picks its way out of the wreckage, shakes out its wings, and takes off through the open ceiling. The men are rooted. Her empty body no longer moves with the walls. How comfortable she looks nestled between twisted wiring and concrete.