

# The Ballet of Camden Town

Sarah Elizabeth Ross

*It's morning in Camden Town, London, and I leave the dorm and run across the middle of the street to the bus stop. The house gate is directly across from the stop and I dodge traffic, reaching out my hand to hail the bus towards school. I don't often take the bus; it's usually crowded and won't always stop. More often, I walk down Camden Road to the Underground station or walk the full two miles to class. Depending on my mood, I can alter my route to accommodate the sights I want to take in. The liveliest path takes me across the canal, and down past the tube station and up the High Street.*

*At the bus stops, the morning commuters wait impatiently, chatting on their mobile phones or reading the newspaper. Students strain under the weight of their bags, headphones jammed in their ears and clutching either cigarettes or coffee. In the morning rain, many must also manage their umbrellas, lifting and tilting them politely to let others pass. A steady stream of workers and students pass in and out of the Camden Town Underground entrances on their way to somewhere else. The crowds flow through the building with its oxblood faience façade, down the escalators deep into the ground, and disperse to destinations throughout the city. Before nine, hundreds will have passed through the weary but elegant building.*

*Across the street from the tube, the newspaper vendor is set up for the day, selling papers and cigarettes and trading in general gossip. Along the High Street, shopkeepers are starting to roll up the protective gates, although only the cafés are doing brisk business at this time of the day; everyone needs that first hit of caffeine. As I continue on my way, just another face in the daily crowd, I nod at the old man and his street side produce stall. In this chaos, he has become a familiar face.*

*By mid day, the streets have calmed, the rain has stopped, and the mothers have begun to venture out with young children to walk or do the daily shopping. The Sainsbury's on Camden Road is particularly large and attracts more people than the average storefront grocery shop. Throughout the day, the Route 29 bus will deposit shoppers in front of the store and collect passengers with shopping bags and granny carts stuffed with groceries. On my way home from class, I pass a number of tempting sandwich shops and eateries, but I always end up at Twins. The café is small, with few seats and little standing room to order. The paninis are delicious though, made fresh. The taller brother, one of the owners, is often the one to take my order and by the end of the year, he has come to know me and my sandwich selection as a regular. We do not know each others' names, and for the most part, I am another anonymous student in this large city.*

*As the work day ends, the evening rush sets in. I escape from the dorm and homework by running errands, often paying a visit to the flower vendor whose stall is next to the newspaper stand. I take in the colors and scents of the bouquets as I find something to brighten my dorm room. At this hour, Sainsbury's takes on a frenzied pace. I am jostled by workers and mothers with toddlers in tow, all trying to get the last ingredients for an evening meal. The cashier and I exchange knowing glances as a child lets out an ear-splitting wail the next aisle over. On nights when I cannot brave the dinner prepared by the dorm kitchen, I escape to Bento, a tiny Japanese restaurant tucked next to a hobby shop and the organic grocery store. Bento has become a ritual, whether for eating in with friends or picking up a take away meal to eat while studying. Walking in the waning light to my destination, I watch the cars whiz by and idle impatiently at stoplights.*

*Because it is spring, the days are longer and after-dinner strolls through Regent's Park become common. Lovers hold hands and watch the setting sun from blankets spread across the grass while groups of Indian men try to complete a cricket game before the light dies. Families push carriages back towards the row houses lining the outskirts of the park, ready to tuck their children in to bed. Leaving the park, the locals are emerging from houses to spend the evening at their favourite pubs. Students relax at tables outside the university watering hole, casually smoking and flirting. I find my friends and we unwind after another long day.*

*Down the street, Camden Town becomes slightly unsavoury. The occasional prostitute propositions passers-by near the Underground station, while the homeless set up camp on the steps of the building, talking among themselves with their dogs curled up beside them. Inebriated revellers weave their way to bus stations or nearby homes. As the bars close and people start heading home, the döner kabob shop does steady business until late in the night, doing its part to provide late night snacks. Further up the road, the street is quieter, more residential. Students make their way across the road to the 24-7 Tesco, where the night clerks know us well. Whether we have been out in the city or merely at the uni, this is the end to our evening: Cadbury bars, kettle crisps, and hysterical laughter.*



Via Verde, Sesto Fiorentino, Italy. Photo: Nicole Eisenmann