

PSYCHO

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GEOGRAPHY

Psychogeography

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B L O O M S B U R Y
LONDON • NEW DELHI • NEW YORK • SYDNEY

For Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.,
writer, wit and sage
(1916–2007)



Drawn on a paper tablecloth at Lasagna Ristorante,
corner of 2nd Avenue and 50th, New York, October 2006

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Walking to New York

‘Honor escapes he who runs after it’
Jewish proverb, from my great-grandfather’s notebook

Prologue

I resolved to walk to New York; in the interests of writing about the experience, certainly, yet also with objectives at once more pedestrian and more ambitious.

This was, perhaps, to be the defining journey so far as my particular brand of psychogeography concerned. Although we psychogeographers are all disciples of Guy Debord and those rollicking Situationists who tottered, soused, across the stage set of 1960s Paris, thereby hoping to tear down the scenery of the Society of the Spectacle with their devilish *dérive*, there are still profound differences between us. While we all want to unpick this conundrum, the manner in which the contemporary world warps the relationship between psyche and place, the ways in which we go about the task, are various.

Some see psychogeography as concerned with the personality of place itself. Thus, in his novels and biographies, Peter Ackroyd practises a ‘phrenology’ of London. He feels up the bumps of the city and so defines its character and proclivities. To read Ackroyd is to become aware that while the physical and political structure of London may have mutated down the ages, as torrents of men and women coursed through its streets, yet their individuality is as nothing, set beside the city’s own enduring personification.

Others, such as my friend Nick Papadimitriou, pursue what he prefers to term ‘deep topography’ – minutely detailed, multi-level examinations of select locales that impact upon the writer’s own microscopic inner-eye. He manufactures slides, in which are pinioned ecology, history, poetry and sociology. Nick points out that most of the psychogeographic fraternity (and, dispiritingly, we are the fraternity: middle-aged men in Gore-Tex, armed with notebooks and cameras, stamping our boots on suburban station platforms, politely requesting the operators of tea kiosks in mossy parks to fill our thermoses, querying the destinations of rural buses. Our prostates swell as we crunch over broken glass, behind the defunct brewery on the outskirts of town) are really only local historians with an attitude problem. Indeed, real, professional local historians view us as insufferably bogus and travelling – if anywhere at all – right up ourselves.

On the night before I set off to walk to New York, my wife looked quizzically at me, as one might regard someone who, whether through disorganisation or ineptitude, had ended up making a journey

both senseless and tedious, and, putting her head charmingly on one side, said: 'Remind me again why is it that you're going to New York?'

Doubtless there was an element of affectionate ribbing in this: she knows that I know that she knows that I know, that while she views my psychogeographic peregrinations as marching along the poorly marked, crinkle-cut frontier between boredom and pretension, she nonetheless not only encourages, but even enjoins them, because of their beneficial impact on my mental health, and, by extension, that of our family.

A digression: do I believe that men are corralled in this field due to certain natural and/or nurtured characteristics, that lead us to believe we have – or actually do inculcate us with – superior visual spatial skills to women, and an inordinate fondness for all aspects of orientation, its pursuit, minutiae, and – worst of all – accessories? Absolutely. And so, while not altogether abandoning the fantasy of encountering a psychogeographic muse who will make these jaunts still more pleasurable, poignant and emotionally revelatory than they already are, in my continent heart I understand that I am fated to wander alone, or at best with one other, occasional . . . male companion.

I will answer my wife's question for you – but not yet. Mine are not writerly journeys in the accepted sense: Rousseau philosophising *à pied*, Goethe rattling into Switzerland in a coach, Cobbe on his clapping gee-gee, assorted Borrowes and Stevensons plodding with their donkeys, Green rocking on a train, Thesiger with a camel up his arse. Even in the modern era there remain writers firmly convinced that there are still discoverable terrains – human, physical, cultural – and ways of traversing them, so as to be able to convey their 'novelty' in words. I am not of their number.

I find it uncanny to be in a world in which, as I write this very sentence, I will travel thirty or forty miles through the upper atmosphere, while – in search of the *mot juste* – glancing either over the shoulder of the kidult watching *The Ant Bully* or at the photographic scenes of Oxford colleges – in a car, their bluey verdancy – that adorn the bulkheads of this Boeing 757 aircraft, on its flight from JFK to Heathrow.

I can only speak for myself: a mammoth depression tramples me, and my mind reaches vanishing point as it negligently orbits the planet; to think, at all, of taking a package tour to visit the Itz'ya pygmies of the Congolese rainforest, or fostering a globalised economy that will, in the fullness of its exaltation, make it possible for them to visit me.

No. I resolved to walk to New York because I wanted to explore. Here was a true Empty Quarter, and, as with other long walks I have taken out of my native city, I had the strong hunch that this would be the first time in the post-industrial era that anyone had ventured across it. True, I had walked from central London to Heathrow before, and I had heard of one adventurer who had walked from JFK to Manhattan, but I was certain I would be the first person to go the whole way, with only the mutually incurious interlude of a club class seat to interfere with the steady, two-mile-an-hour, metronomic rhythm of my legs, parting and marrying, parting and marrying.

This is one part of the answer to my wife's question; the second is to observe that I had *reasons* to go to New York: relatives to see, a writers' residency to launch, an interview in connection with the US publication of one of my novels. Whatever my wife thought (or thought I didn't think).

This was what distinguishes my psychogeography from that of the others. This was to be not a randomised transit, intended to outfox prescribed folkways. (You read of such things, on the well-known match: proceeding across Toronto by throwing a dice, journeying to unlovely parts of Florence with carefully contrived non-deliberation.) And nor was it to be like the treks undertaken by Iain Sinclair and the other Celtic Englishman whose circumnavigation of the M25 (London's orbital motorway), or travels along the A13 to Southend, were dogged, shamanic attempts to storm these concrete bastions – with their bark-chip, shrubbery-planted revetments – laying siege with the trebuchet of his prose-poetry and catapulting great hunks of stony verbiage into them, so that the capitalists abandoned their ca-

and ran, screaming, tongues cleaved to the roofs of their mouths.

No. I resolved to walk to New York because I had business there, to explore; and, also, because in so doing, I hoped to suture up one of the wounds in my own, divided psyche: to sew together my American and my English flesh, my mother's and my father's body bags, sundered by marriage, riveted by death. And maybe even, at a more grandiose level (exhibiting what might be termed a Terrorist Personality Disorder), to expiate the sense of weird culpability that had dogged me, ever since September 2001, when, returning from lunch with our then one-month-old youngest son, my wife, of pure, journalistic reflex, snapped on the rolling news channel.



First we saw recorded footage of the North Tower being hit by American Airlines Flight 11; and then, seamlessly, live footage of the South Tower, as United Airlines Flight 175 punched a hole in its façade that had all the cartoon noir simplicity of Mickey Mouse's silhouette. Jaw slack, mind numb, we stared at the shaken-up snow globe of Manhattan for a while, then said to my wife: 'Well, there's nothing much I can do about this, I'm going upstairs to work.' Only to have her, twenty minutes later, shout up three storeys of our London house: 'Look! The whole building is collapsing, I really think you ought to be watching this!'

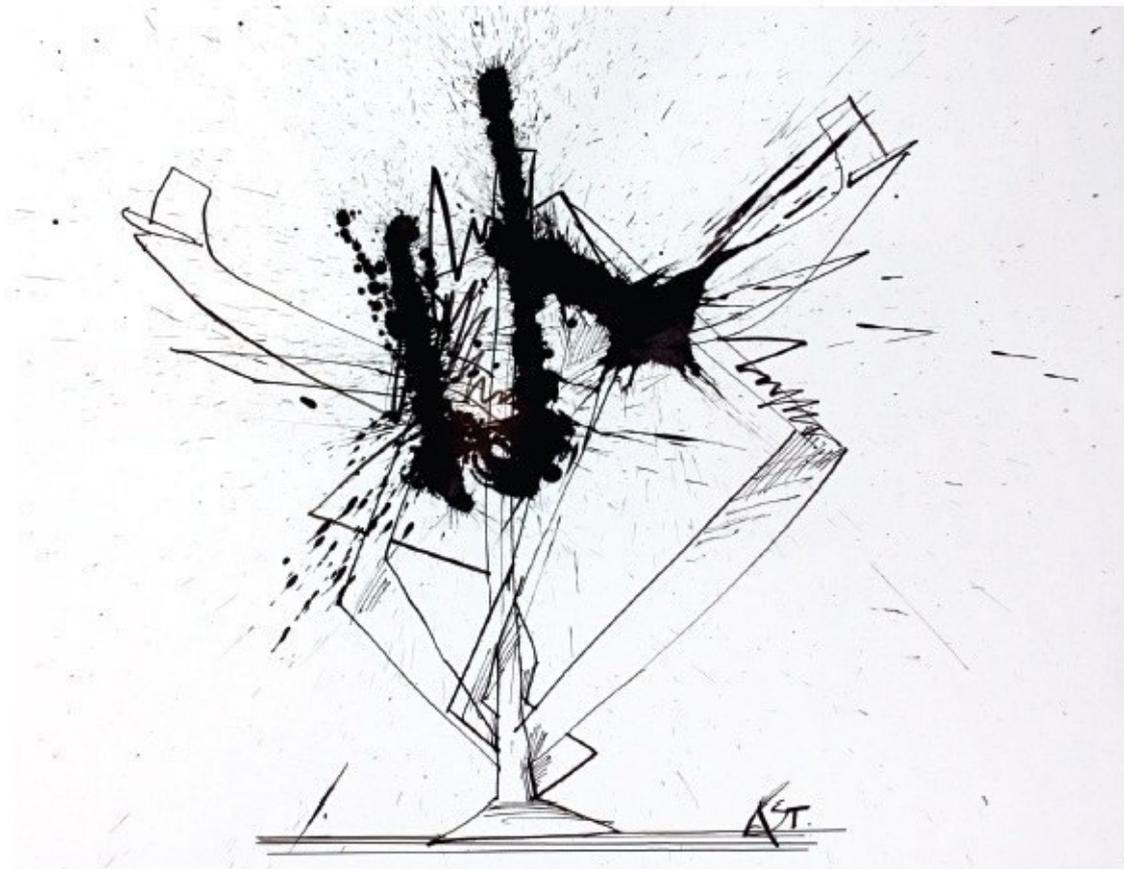
Indeed, I ought. And not to minimise my own part in it (how would this be possible?), things were not the same afterwards, for me, for the dead, the maimed and the traumatised, for Muslims, martyrs, Republicans, Jews and even journalists. So, I resolved to walk to New York in the spirit of peace, tracked lazily overhead, as I traversed west London, by the fat fuselages of the long procession of jets that caromed down the crystal hill of the flight path into Heathrow.

Could my own, slow advance, needle-limbs piercing and repiercing the fabric of reality, sew up this singularity, this tear in the space-time continuum through which medievalism had prolapsed? Let me slow down . . . a trick-turning ape balancing the globe . . . slower and slower, then halting altogether – a long fermata: serpentine, hairy arms bat at biplanes – before reversing it . . . walking backwards to roll back the years to some poorly imagined Arcadian past, where livestock, saints and the virginal abide by the Laws and a pleasing *sfumato* obscures everything.

On my walk to New York, passing through Wandsworth Park, which lies on the south side of the Thames, just before Putney Bridge, I was struck by the industrial blower mounted on the back of a small truck that was sending the old-gold autumnal leaves skittering away across the combed grass.

This was like some hackneyed filmic symbol – the pages of a calendar torn off by invisible hands used to denote the passage of time. And walking, too, blows back the years, especially in urban contexts. The solitary walker is, himself, an insurgent against the contemporary world, an ambulatory time traveller. The first time I walked to Heathrow Airport, I reached the road tunnel that plunges beneath the runways and into the terminal complex, only to find the following sign: ‘No pedestrian access. Go back to the Renaissance.’ This was, of course, a hotel on the Bath Road from where you are required to take a shuttle bus.

Yes, this was to be a peaceable protest, this discontinuous march from Stockwell in south London to the Lower East Side of Manhattan. If I was assaulting a tyranny it was one of distance, and of a form of transportation that decentres and destabilises us, making all of us that can afford it subjects of a ribbon empire that encircles the globe. This is a papery and insubstantial realm, like a sanitary strapping wrapped around a toilet bowl.



It's Wednesday, and I must be in Bangkok, Benin or Beijing, although not because I know in any meaningful sense *where* I am; for, if you were to take me outside this hotel, I'd be hard pressed to point north, let alone tell you what lay in that direction. When we marvel at the hermetic culture of the foreign bases, from which, sated by roast meals and entertained by imported TV shows, our fucked-up troops emerge to fuck up those who can't afford airline seats, we should rightly understand that we too belong to this army of disorientation, sallying forth from Holiday Inns and Hiltons, on missions of search & acquisition.

Bite down on this, why don't you? Bin Laden spoke of 9/11 as a 'spectacular', a horrid echo of Debord. And his terrorist affiliates – who applied to Al-Qaeda for venture capital, exactly like any other business start-up – weren't only attacking the Twin Towers as the supreme interfusion of capitalistic symbol and Western hegemonic reality, they were also attacking our transport system. To think of the civilians killed as collateral damage, as we do when we bunker-bust in Afghanistan and Iraq or our proxies do in the Lebanon and Somalia.

Even in England's own greening, our home-grown religious maniacs understood which form of transport was appropriate (as did the Moroccan Al-Qaeda freelancers who wreaked pre-emptive vengeance on Madrid). They may have been led by a lowly classroom assistant, yet as they petted and aroused their new primitivism via the internet – self-grooming paedophiles, both corrupters and corrupted in a worldwide web of deception – there was this nascent awareness: that just as the Modernism of New York reached its apogee in the 1920s, with its pre-stressed steel and poured concrete buildings, so London's own, Modernist era was at the turn of the previous century: the soaring glass and iron rail terminuses, the deep-level Tube system augured through the clay of the Thames Valley. The 'spectaculars' of both 9/11 in New York and 7/7 in London were thus attacks on our notion of ourselves as, above all, a mobile society, ever stimulating our ever growing, ever more turgid economy with rapid movements of hand and eye.

They – that nebulous, shape-shifting 'other' – have remained faithful to this plan of attack. Nothing so static as a stadium or a queue for them, and into the summer of 2006, if the spooks are to be believed, they persisted with their evil designs on transatlantic flight. They won't let go of the possibility of pulling off a 'spectacular' to match their last. The bomb-making materials may have been mundane – hair-spray, cleaning fluid, lighter fuel – but the blast would be anything but, tearing down tens – scores, even – of jets from the sky, thereby, simultaneously, thrusting the eastern seaboard away from the West Country, while yet, perversely, drawing them into tight, political proximity.

Still, if the spectacularists were intent on dividing and ruling, then they couldn't have done better. The seeming unanimity in the first, shocked months after 9/11 was just that. Soon enough, we began 'other' each other.

The opposition to the retributive attacks on Afghanistan began quickly here in London. I was going to public meetings within days, and a local Stop the War coalition committee was set up. Attending this (in the upstairs hall of the local swimming baths, used typically for winter badminton and five-a-side soccer), I was struck by the juxtaposition between the platform apparatchiks and the masses. The latter were *rentiers* living off the consumer credit provided by their ever escalating property values; the former, the same rent-a-proles that I'd seen at leftist groupuscules a quarter-century before, right down to their Doctor Marten's boots; right up to their shop-worn rhetoric. When I addressed the meeting I said only this: that for every 'comrade' one of them uttered they could guarantee losing another hundred – or thousand – potential supporters.

It's only the benefit of hind-facetiousness that leads me to observe how queer it was that while these unrepentant Trotskyists were, with dull predictability, using one coalition as a front for their belated attempts to kick-start the permanent revolution, so their recusant brothers and sisters were the *éminences grises* behind another one; a coalition that, even as we fruitlessly deliberated, was kicking the chocks away from its B52s.

And so it went on: the grapes of wrath trailed across Afghanistan and Iraq, the bitter *vendage* of civilian deaths, then the hypostatisation of terror through the cirrhotic liver of another failed state. Yet, throughout all of this, what mattered most was the way we were divided: from our consciences from our own, delusional sense of righteousness. As if the dreadful, old world of left and right were any less binary than this terrible new one? Both the best, the worst and – more importantly – the mediocre, lacked all conviction, while all three moieties were, nonetheless, full of passionate intensity.

What became clear to me in the short term was how wrong I'd been: at the back end of 2001, all the way through to March 2003, the numbers in Britain opposing the West's interventionism grew and grew. For every 'comrade' uttered at a swimming-pool meeting, a hundred more rushed to the colour rally beneath a burning Stars and Stripes. The climacteric came for me when a good friend told me

how he had wept with joy to see the flag of the USA set light to in Whitehall.



Now, hang on a minute, I thought: I'm an American. And ever since a little – and very understandable – contretemps with the black shirts of Homeland Security, as I was entering the States in 2002 (a trifling matter of drugs convictions), I had been compelled to activate my citizenship and travel to the US on a US passport. Yet even without this very personal goad, I like to think the sheer mirror-imaging of one array of Manicheans by another would have jibed, and made me realise that what was needed here was a little less ideology – not still more; a little less posturing about human rights and a little more hand-to-hand contact.

So much to heal with my feet: along with the semi-self-hatred of a demi-Jew, I now had the internecine conflict between my American and my English sides. Not that this was of a form that my parents would have understood, dying as they both had, before the spectacularists really got going. Nor was theirs a transatlantic marriage fraught by the way either of them pronounced 'either'. True, my father, towards the end of his own life, was subject to saying that my mother's might have been happier if she'd married 'a nice, little Jewish man', but I never remember him saying anything at all about the fact that his second wife was an American.

As for my mother, she was bipartisan in the extreme: opining at one and the same time that she loathed what the States had become politically, while never for a second dreaming of renouncing her citizenship; and, indeed, taking the trouble to ensure that my brother, Jonathan, and I would share it.

After she died, I found a letter in my mother's papers, apparently solicited by her from a cousin in Ohio. It's dated 1980 and this cousin writes that, on cleaning out his basement, he came upon a few books belonging to my great-grandfather. One of these, a prayer book published in Russia in 1883, had some Hebrew handwriting on its end papers. This, the cousin took the trouble to have translated.

It's slim pickings. Written in November 1919, on the first page my great-grandfather employs the Star of David as a device and writes in each section, thus: 'My name. This is. The ritual slaughter of Isaac son of Rabbi Yehuda Zalkind or Rosenbloom. Born in Villna.' The rest is a list of holy books the patriarch particularly favoured, some proverbs and a few terse remarks about his off spring. Isaac

second son, my grandfather, is glossed: 'My son Yaakov was born the day after Yom Kippur. It was Tuesday at 6.00 in the morning. October 7, 1891. 24 Watrin Street [sic?], America.'

Why thanks, Isaac, that really hammers it down. It is almost as if you anticipated the topographic obsession of your descendant, and decided to utterly frustrate it. It's beautifully succinct, that address expressing an ideation, I would say, as much as a location. In its way, my great-grandfather's imagining of America was as bald as any spectacularist's.

My mother spoke little of her childhood and was profoundly uneasy with her Jewishness. She denied ever having been *bas mitzvahed* – which was untrue. In retrospect, she was a typical, third-generation immigrant. At one time my mother implied that we were Poles, at another, Russian. *Vilna*, certainly, is in Belarus. I suspect she either didn't know, didn't want to know, and maybe even didn't care. The 'Rosenbloom' was, so far as she was concerned, an insult; and being by nature a resentful person, she liked to dwell on this. She bought the old canard that this was a joke name imposed on us by wiseacre Ellis Island officialdom, probably Irish-Americans. In due course my Uncle Bob changed his name to Ross.

From where did we come to New York? And, more importantly, how? I know not. Isaac writes: 'I left Romshishiak Falk Havana on September 11, 1888. I came to America November 26, 1888 on Wednesday.' Is this a progression of places: Romshishiak – Falk – Havana, as Joyce summed up his itinerary for the 1900s: 'Trieste – Zurich – Paris'? The timing would seem to suggest it. One thing for certain: whatever his route, my great-grandfather didn't walk to New York.

Walk One: Bucolic London



Enough. 7.30 a.m., Wednesday 29 November 2006. Coffee drunk, cigarette smoked, bowels evacuated and I'm off, tiptoeing from the Victorian house in Stockwell where my wife and children are still abed. A four-storey, terraced house I've lived and written in this last decade, gradually cluttering up the locale with more and more narrative, on paper and in memory.

I'm keyed up as I head off along the road; the sky behind the block of flats ahead is cloudless and still a paving-stone grey; yet it brightens from pace to pace – the day will be clear. I'm conscious that even if I'll only be gone a matter of days I will not return from the walk to New York the same man. I shall have learnt something. Paul Theroux writes, in *The Great Railway Bazaar*, of sliding past the backs of London houses, as the first train of many carries him off. At the foot of the railway embankment properly settled lives are piled – cucumber frames and washing lines effulgent in the morning sunlight – while with each click-clackety mile, the writer becomes more exiguous, more an observer.

But here, in Stockwell, striding down to the Wandsworth Road and working my way through the redbrick blocks of the interwar, London County Council flats, I'm still heavily embodied. The hydrocephalic brow of Lambeth College – a building of surpassing ugliness, Brutalism as deformity – has featured in one of my stories, as has this very route, set down – if not exactly immortalised – in another of my tales, 'The Five Swing Walk'.

I have limned then hymned the fly-tipped garbage at the bottom of these flats: the Stella Artois boxes, crushed picnic chairs, torn-out MDF kitchen units and garish plastic toys – even the swollen gonads of the humped, black rubbish bags. I have meditated upon our local equivalents of a catafalque – angle irons sprouting from brick, strung with barbed wire and steel mesh, webbed with polythene more times than I care to think. Oft times London is a heavy coffin, borne upon such security ornamentation.



The wholesale fruit and vegetable market at Nine Elms is stirring, diesels cough and splutter. Casual workers – Kosovan, by the looks of them – clamber over the wall and down on to a vertical aligned pallet. They've come a long way from the Balkans to take this short cut through the Patmore Estate. They limp off ahead of me between the chequerboard blocks along Thessaly Road. I walk the children to Battersea Park down this road, I cycle this way if I am going anywhere in the west London. Always, the small parade of shops beneath the last block of flats has struck me as the saddest, the most miserable encrustation of commerce: FF Foodfare, Better Buys of Battersea, Thessaly Newsagents – stinky little caves full of tomato soup, sugar and cut-price alcohol.

Now, the encrustation has been crushed. A month ago a crane working on the adjacent building side collapsed on to these flats. A local man, Michael Alexa, aged twenty-three, was killed washing his car. The pathos of this: the off-duty bus driver, soaping the flanks of his motor one second, the next according to a local resident – 'It was like he'd been pushed into the windscreen, and the crane had gone right through him.' The crane operator was also killed. The flats are now knock-kneed and condemned; the end of the building has been roughly truncated. In the gutter are stooks of faded flowers in cellophane funnels, together with handwritten condolence cards: the wayside shrine of contemporary folk religion.

Barratt Homes – whose crane did for the bus driver – are putting up new apartments here in anticipation of the redevelopment of Battersea Power Station. Sir Giles Gilbert Scott's behemoth dominates this quarter of London – perhaps, psychically, the entire city. The footprint of the building is larger than Trafalgar Square; the main turbine hall could engulf Wren's St Paul's, dome and all. Its distinctive, inverse-pool-table shape squats on the beer-soaked pub carpet of the London sky, yet for almost a quarter-century now the hulk has been hollowed out: an awesome shell of a Modernist ruin.

While the old Power Station *could* engulf St Paul's, it does eat developers. There's something cheering in the way it gobbles them up. First it was Robert McAlpine, the construction tycoon and Tory Party Treasurer, and now the Hwangs, the brothers who run Park, a Hong Kong-based property consortium, have been ingurgitated. They were bruiting their plans about town for a while: they were going to stuff the hulk with luxury flats, multiplex cinemas, design studios, hotels, conference centres and restaurants. Ah, restaurants! When the Hwangs' PR flak took me round the sight, we went up on the roof and he pointed to the top of one of the signature chimneys: 'There's going to be a circular restaurant in there,' he said. 'The most exclusive in London, only sixteen diners, round a single table.'

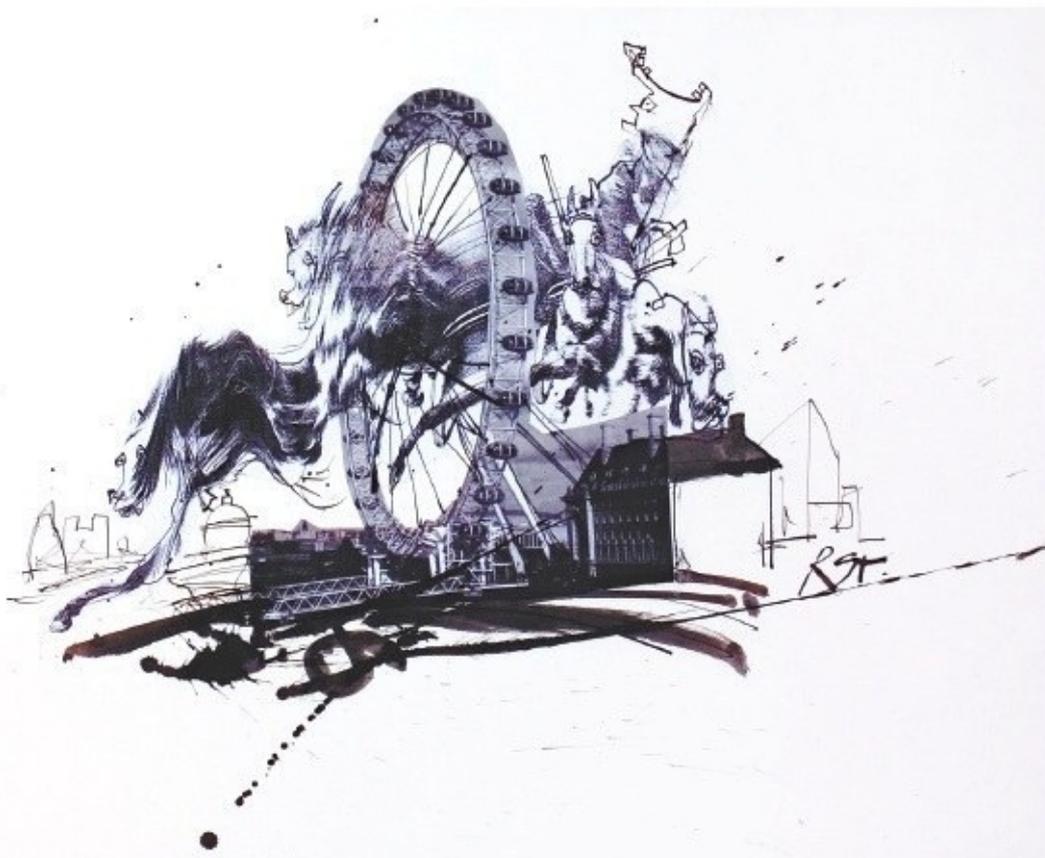
accessed by a lift.'

The only thing that got eaten was his bosses. The costs mounted. The Power Station is built from thousands upon thousands of courses of muddy London bricks. It's as close to a Babylonian ziggurat as any twentieth-century building could be. The mortar between these bricks perished during the Power Station's working life. As it's a listed building, any developers are under an obligation to preserve its fabric extant; and when they buy the building they all swear they will, even if it means repointing every single brick. But the truth is, you couldn't repoint Battersea Power Station even if you had every bricklayer in Romania to hand.

Now the Hwangs have flogged it to an Irish consortium, Treasury Holdings, and the new owners are making all the same noises they once did, little burps and lip smacks of developing satiety. A Council spokesman says, 'It's early days', but I say the table's already set in the chimney-top restaurant, and the developer is on the menu.

The foolish purchasers of Barratt Homes' apartments – who promise on their billboards that prospective residents will be next to the most exciting new development in the city – will instead live out their mortgages confronted by this crumbling, acid-corroded behemoth.

So Battersea Power Station stands, as a dead weight, pinioning the Thames littoral. As I stride alongside it and look to the north-east, I see the glinting tiara of the London Eye Ferris wheel, poking above the jumble of warehouse units and the Cringle Dock Waste Management Centre. Beside the Eye are the golden finials of the Houses of Parliament: Walt Disney and Sir Walter Scott collaborate on a fantasia of a democracy. The hoardings screening off the foreground of the Power Station are plastered with tag lines: 'A is for Art', 'F is for Fashion', 'H is for Homes' – such inspiring remedial instruction.



In Battersea Park a few commuters are hurrying along the gravel paths and potholed roadways. The gondola that advertises the Gondola Café is heeled over in the muddy waters of the boating lake. On the far shore rises the rockery, where my smaller children like to clamber in teensy ravines choked with

empty beer cans. So the sublime ends. I work my way down through the glades and avenues, Victorian conception of a municipal garden-for-all, imposed atop this old shambles where once gypsies camped and knackers boiled horses' corpses down for glue.

It's always thus: the first few hours of a long walk out of London. Gummed up with memories and referentia, my very psyche not only feels sticky – but thickening by the yard. It occurs to me that I am akin to any literary traveller, it's Laurence Sterne, oscillating in the moment, dizzied by impressions and unable to make it from the remise door to the Calais Inn, let alone progress into France and Italy.

A recent re-landscaping of the Park has raised hillocks; grassy lipomas curve parenthetically around new public toilets that are, themselves, modishly curvilinear and walled with glass bricks. Winter pansies flare in serried ranks. Yet to my eye the ornamental troughs filled with scuzzy water, the box shrub holders decorated with sheet metal cut into flame shapes and the circlets of flagpoles, are more present. No tumulus nouveau can obscure these: the remnants of the old Battersea Funfair that I revered as a child.

A school friend's tenth birthday party. His father drove us down here from Highgate in his E-Type Jaguar. The father and his two sons – all three had tight globes of curly hair; Jewfros, you might say. He gave all us kids a fifty pence coin to spend – shocking largesse; the pentagonal heft of the novel currency, sharp in my hand. I couldn't wait to spend it on the Watersplash ride. I wasn't surprised when, a quarter-century later, this cool, beneficent dude emerged as one of the chief benefactors of Tony Blair's New Labour.

Or fazed by *The Day the Earth Caught Fire*, a British sci-fi film, made in the year of my birth which swam on to TV during my dopey years in the late seventies. The protagonists are on the rollercoaster at Battersea Funfair when the Thames transmogrifies into a sheet of flame. A joint of Moroccan hash and hokey special effects – what could be finer? And now? Why, the parallax of time which draws formerly distant events into tight proximity – has quite as much force as the nuclear tests that, in the film, push the earth from its axis and send it careering towards the sun. 1961, then 1977, now 2006 – the futuristic lineaments of the 1950s Funfair withstand the passage of the decades, while all about them insect joggers buzz and blip.

I recall the summer of 1989, and the wedding of some friends held in the lee of the Peace Pagoda, at that time a new and startling structure, like the Albert Memorial squatted in by four svelte Buddhas. I remember – what seemed to me – a rancorous speech by the bride's father. I put a version of it into my novella, *Cock*. Then it's a decade later, and I'm lifting one of my kids up on to the top tier of the Pagoda, so he or she can consort with the Prince of Non-Attachment. It was raining, a Parks Police car came sidling up the avenue and one of the cops hailed us through a megaphone: 'Get down off the Buddha!'

Now, proceeding, I see over there the little plantation of trees beside Albert Bridge. My friend John McVicar, once the most wanted man in Britain – latterly not much wanted at all, so he moved to Bulgaria to hunt wild boar – planted a tree here for his late mother. It would've been in the mid-1990s. Could it be that inapposite conifer, the quick green fuse of which lances through cast-iron railing? Below the Thames unrolls the smooth production line of its ebb tide, upon which are bolted together garbage scows heading down from Wandsworth.

Perhaps. Oscar and Jimmy walk on the far side of the river, plotting nocturnes, proleptical graffiti-spraying butterflies. Over towards Chelsea shines the single, gold ball atop the Chelsea Harbour development. This was the motif – the ball rises and falls with the tide, like a ball cock in a cistern – with which I opened my 1997 novel *Great Apes*. Chelsea Harbour, an integrated development of luxury flats and costly retail outlets. Think gym, think gated, think Eurotrash. Michael Caine had a restaurant here – perhaps he still does – certainly, it would be fair to say that his entire acting career

led up to this imposture. The chirpy Cockney rhymer: 'My name is 'arry Palmer, I run a restaurant in Chelsea 'arbour.'

In his 2001 novel *Millennium People* J.G. Ballard made an apocalyptic dystopia of Chelsea Harbour, wreathing the ugly pagoda of its central tower with the smoke from the Volvos and Range Rovers set on fire by its revolting tenants: bored, nihilistic bourgeois; spectacularists seeking some vivification in violence. I now realise, on this very walk, that Jim has made this Thames littoral his own. Not that he really cares about London per se, although, looked at another way, he is the pure psychogeographer of us all, ever dissolving the particular and the historical in the transient and the psychic. Making states into states of mind. From Terry Farrell's spec office block – now occupied by the Secret Service – to Chelsea Harbour, and on upriver, the last fifteen years have seen a great and glassy burgeoning of these – Jim's mind children – 'luxury' developments. At first rectilinear and concrete, latterly faced with 'weathered' boards, to give them that authentic 'wharf' feel, the apartment blocks would be just as at home in Malmö or on the Mediterranean.

I won't get very far if memories, dreams and reflections continue to obscure this bright, late November morning. In the 1960s, even a decade after the Clean Air Act, I can still remember the smog being London 'particulars' so thick we had to feel our way along the privet hedges back home from the Tube station. These are cloudy memories of a foggy past, but all is clear on the embankment beside Lord Norman Foster's atelier; even at this hour young architects are a'CADing, and through the white graticule of the blind I can see neat, white models of towns, plotted in wood and plastic. They are graphic, apprehensible, unlike the two-millennia-old moraine I'm struggling across.



Thankfully, past Battersea Bridge things clear a little. I'm gathering pace and breasting the ebb tide of commuters walking, jogging and cycling along the riverside path. I am the reverse commuter, for while they head from the suburbs into the city centre, I pack my briefcase and walk to work on the periphery; it's there that I stake my claim, mine my words. I'm gathering pace – and satisfactorily losing definition. Soon I'll be Ballardian myself, my name a prosaic Anglo-Saxon puzzle – Vaughan Ventriss, Laing – which, even when solved, will tell you only my profession and my class.

But at St Mary's, Battersea, a perfect jewel of a late eighteenth-century church, I'm derailed once more. A stiletto steeple stabs up from this solid yet airy building. At the foot of the small, irregular churchyard, the barges of urban shedonists are permanently moored; while all around mount the gleaming bluffs of still more luxury apartments. Somewhere inside these there are dot-com start-ups

millionaires, smearing on lube and despair, whereas inside St Mary's, 220-odd years ago, William Blake married Catherine Boucher, the daughter of a local market gardener. She signed the register with an unenigmatic 'X'. Blake – what would he have made of walking to New York? Blake, of whose work it's been said: this is what a bad artist would produce if he were to be a genius.

I see the church door is open – it's always been locked when I've passed this way before – so enter, to hear the creed intoned by a crop-headed curate: 'Glory be to the Father, and to the Son . . . and then the whispered gentility of the all-female congregation's response. In the vestibule there are handy umbrellas to keep these dry communicants still drier. The church's interior is as expected: manila envelopes lain out for donations, jam jars containing weedy specimens, and a dangling chandelier as organic as a beehive. This is the desiccated diminuendo of the Church of England; which began in the moist rage of paterfamilias manqué is ending with a little parched glory for the (absent) father.

I think Blake would've depicted the walk to New York thus: with me a small figure, crushed beneath the dead weight of the blue sky, while across this loose swathe the fuselages of the aircraft coming in to land at Heathrow are struggling to separate from one another, like the proto-Muybridge time-lapse etchings that the bad genius made of angels and human traffic. The nose cones of 747s and airbuses stretched apart, between them stria of ectoplasm, time-goo.

At Battersea Reach the riverbanks draw back. Think Rotterdam, and the kindergarten Cubism of Dutch contemporary architecture, yet bowdlerised still further by the cost considerations of the London developers, the complacent edificers of Kingfisher and Oyster wharves. The world is getting hotter; hotter right here as I head inland, sopping up monoxide as I circumambulate the gyroscope advertising hoarding that dangles above the roundabout at the end of Wandsworth Bridge. Maybe I should buy the Navman sat-nav advertised on a fly-poster, a snip at £149.99, inclusive of free set-up and demo? With a satellite navigation system, I need never again inhabit the physical world; I can simply look from dash-mounted screen to windscreen and back again, as I drive – on instrumentation alone – from my office workstation to my domestic entertainment system. What a blessed relief.

Blessed relief from Jew's Lane and the gnomon of a lamp-post, its hard shadow lying across a cycle path, defined by paint as thick as toothpaste. Blessed relief from the old London brick of a Fuller pub, that's advertised, bizarrely, by a sign depicting a giant hand picking up an ocean-going liner. London Pride – that's Fuller's finest tipple. In my drinking days I had plenty of it – pride, that is. Blessed relief from the Wandsworth waste depot: yellowy container-loads of composted shit, blood and obsolete electrical goods, being winched out over the river, then down on to barges, that in turn will be pushed through the twisting colon of the Thames, downriver.

Here, the Wandle, one of London's lost rivers, joins the Thames. Two years ago, in the summer, I turned left at this fluvial junction and followed its course upstream, past William Morris's wallpaper factory at Merton and Lady Hamilton's house. A female psychogeographer, if ever there was one, Emma diverted the Wandle to run through her grounds, and dubbed it 'the Nile' in honour of her lopsided squeeze. I went on, past where the Wandle rises at Carshalton, thence to Croydon, thence up and on to the North Downs, where, at a curious feature called the Norr Chalk Pinnacle, I could see the entire lower valley of the Thames spread out before me: the flybuzz of aircraft circling over Heathrow, the tiny minarets of the city, the Jew's harp of the Queen Elizabeth II Bridge, vibrating in Dartford.

I plodded on, down into the Surrey weald, up into the Ashdown Forest, down into the Sussex weald and up again on to the South Downs. I didn't stop until I reached Newhaven on the south coast, three days after I'd quit the Thames. I've been doing this for a few years now: stepping from my London house and stalking a hundred miles or so into the hinterland. In middle age I no longer want to know where I'm going – only where I've been all these years.

This summer I walked from where I live now, to where I was born, to where I grew up, to where I was at school, to where I was at university. Stockwell – Charing Cross – Hampstead Garden Suburb – Finchley – Oxford. My own Trieste – Zurich – Paris, the itinerary of an internal exile. When I was a teenager I assumed that I'd travel – and far. Then my father emigrated, my mother died and my brothers moved abroad, while I remained here, in London. Now I realise I never wanted to travel at all, I simply get away from – what psychotherapeutic geographers dub – my Family of Origin. How good of them to leave me in vacant possession of an entire metropolis, so that I could furnish it with my own memories, dreams and reflections.

The steely façades of the riverfront blocks are now warm to the touch, and builders and tradesmen are stripped to their T-shirts. I left Stockwell in cagoule and cashmere pullover, but as I gain Putney Bridge I strip to my own T-shirt and sit at a zinc-topped table outside a branch of Carluccio's, sipping a latte and eating an almond pastry. Inside the décor is scrubbed, shining. Cheeses, salamis, potted peppers and pimentos – they all crackle beneath cellophane and strip lighting. I've met Carluccio himself on a couple of occasions; he's a friend of a friend. Here he is, on the cover of one of his cookery books which is propped up on a central display table underneath a dwarf Christmas tree. *Antonio Carluccio Goes Wild*. He carries a wooden truckle full of tasty herbage; he looks rubicund and happy – not feral at all.

Yes, Jim Ballard was right. The public spaces of London are becoming outdoor atria, retail parks and boulevards servicing Mediterranean-style business parks. Patrick Keiller, on the other hand, was wrong. The melancholia that infuses his epic and elegiac 1991 film, *London*, has been blown away like the leaves in Wandsworth Park – by an airy consensus: nothing succeeds like excess. It's easier for those of my generation, coming to our majority in the dog days of the early 1980s, to embrace the city in permanent decline. The desuetude and neglect of public spaces is filmic, while the camera lens simply reflects itself in mirrored buildings.

I sit reading my wife's column in the *Independent*. She's anatomised the grisly aftermath of the stabbing of Tom ap Rhys Price, a young solicitor who was murdered in Kensal Rise, north London. His killers have been shown extraordinary compassion by the victim's mother, who has decided to set up a charity to aid such disadvantaged inner-city black kids. I'm still in touch with the mother since she's linked by mobile phone, so I text her my congratulations on her piece as I continue on up the Putney shore, past the boathouses where jolly, hefty girls, shrink-wrapped in Lycra, carry sculls down the slope to the lapping waves.

It's time to part from Father Thames – I'll meet him again at Richmond Bridge. I turn aside from the river and take a diagonal traverse across Putney Common. My mobile phone rings – it's my wife. She needs to talk about our teenage son: he's indolent and stumbling about in the hazy realm of late adolescence. What to say? At his age I was intellectually omnivorous, true, but I was also teaching myself to shoot up smack. I think he's doing just fine; he's charming, funny and personable. But that's not the point: this phone call, this fishing line, lands me in the reticulation of my responsibilities. I thrash there as I plod through coverts and cross over sports pitches. I'm in Shepherd's Bush – not Putney. I'm in my life, clamped in my persona, not the ghost in London's machine I fervently wish to be.

I'm unable to lose myself again until I break the connection, then find myself at the junction of the Upper Richmond Road and Priory Lane. I resist the urge to divert into memories of ill-advised sex with a girl from Sheen. It was daytime in her girlhood bedroom . . . I was shocked by the thick hair sprouting from the aureoles of her dirigible breasts . . . No. Priory Lane runs up ahead of me, I have a rendezvous to make at Richmond Bridge by noon. If I come this way at all, to this outer suburbia, half a mile against Henry VIII's hunting ground, it's only to visit friends banged up in the private psychiatric hospital, the Priory. The Priory – notorious, it is. Notorious not least because its millionaire owner, I

Chai Patel, is bound up in the cash-for-honours scandal that is, predictably, darkening still more the dying days of the Blair regime.

And notorious also for its celebrity clientele: the jittery cokehead models and smacked-about rockers, who gabble and purge in its addiction unit. The Priory: such a cliché that there's already been a chat show on British TV called *The Priory*. The Priory, a fine, large, Gothic-revival house that already by 1876 was being gazetted thus: 'Built for the late Lord Justice Sir J. Knight Bruce, it is now a private lunatic asylum.' Indeed, yes. I've been here to visit, to sit with desolate friends on its sickly lawns, beneath its magnolia faux-battlements. Or, on provision of an exeat, to wander with the soddos in Richmond Park, anatomising how it can be that their lives have been so dismembered.

But, before I reach the environs of the Priory, I'm struck by a mean little breezeblock parade of shops, stuck in the arse end of a 1980s development. 'St Marcus' reads the sign on the largest of these. 'S.A. Minimart, Biltong and Boere Wors'. Intrigued, I go in, to find myself surrounded by what look like flattened bulls' pizzles, dangling from steel rails. Signs at one end of these rails read 'Hard End' at the other 'Soft'. These are, perforce, strips of biltong – the sign didn't lie. This has to be the biggest biltong emporium in the northern hemisphere. There are hundreds of strips of the stuff: chilli flavoured biltong, garlic biltong, biltong flavoured any number of ways. How many hard-masticating South Africans must London contain in order to support this minimart full of beef jerky?

The great wonder of my adult life – a desultory period, 1979–2006, all are agreed, no Blitz only bit of this and that, epochs of haircuts – has been the cosmopolitanisation of London. The three hundred languages spoken on the streets of the city; the rise in the ethnic minority population from 7 per cent to 25 per cent; the minicab drivers more familiar with Conkary than the Cally Road; and these strips of biltong are part of that, a sinewy girdle about the globe. I buy one to gnaw on, washed down with Evian, as I foot it up Priory Lane, through Roehampton Gate and into the park.

Which I've never liked, really. Never liked its trees, artificially grouped: Yikes! I want to cry, here comes the copse! The last day of November and the leaves are still on the oaks and beeches, mellow gold and brown as Old Holborn hand-rolling tobacco. Beneath this canopy lie artily deposited trunks strewn about on the tawny sward. Their bark stripped by the deer, they're like the toppled torsos of some de Chirico dreamscape.

Bertrand Russell grew up here, in one of the capacious lodges. A mean-spirited childhood with emotionally retarded grandparents deranged by snobbery and their proximity to power. Think cold winter walks, crackling over hoarfrost in scratchy tweed knickerbockers. Think mortification of the bowels with lumps of suet. No wonder the weedy kid plotted to reduce language to a series of logical formulae. Poor little fucker.

I've never liked Richmond Park's contrived ambience of the farouche – a centuries' old shtick. The scale of Richmond Park is wrong: people come here to drive about in their SUVs and look at the deer and, in fairness, this being the time of the annual cull – the deer, that is, not the people – they are in great numbers, the stags photogenically tossing their antlers. But if an SUV in central London is a solecism, here in the park it's an insult. The local council certainly think so – they've become the first in London to levy a special tax on the hypertrophied all-terrain baby-buggies, the Porsche Cayenne and Volkswagen Touaregs. Vehicles, I was told recently, that are known to cognescenti as 'badger cars'. Henry VIII would have approved. I picture him hunting deer armed with a 9mm Glock pistol from the front seat of his Land Rover Vogue. He is impersonated by Ray Winstone, who, on cornering his prey, snarls: 'Gotcha, you filfy littul toerag . . .'

I gain the crest of the hill and there it is, falling away behind me, swags and ruches of greenery and brick, under the blue-painted ceiling of its recent conversion: New London, city of the toppermost property prices. I can see a golden drop of sunlight on the glans of the Swiss Re Tower (Lord Foster's phallus, commonly known as the Gherkin), and the inverted pool table of Battersea Power Station.

can see the Hampstead massif and the Telecom Tower. I can see my life, entire, in a single saccade.

Then I go over the top, past the Royal Star and Garter Home, a redbrick semi on steroids with neoclassical breast implants. Below me the Terrace Gardens fall away, beyond them Petersham Meadows and then the river again, boats moored in mid-stream. The Thames shines bright between wooded banks that are deceptively countrified. I trudge down Richmond Hill, past the kind of shop my mother would have damned as 'chi-chi' – although not without a trace of envy. Where did she get all this snobbery from? True, she attended Richmond Hill High School herself. But I thought that was Richmond Hill on Long Island. Did they anticipate Nancy Mitford there? Was every particular divided into U and Non-U? Expressions my mother also coveted as her own.

Mediterraneo, The Gooday Gallery (in this stands a man, wearing a shirt, the entire back of which is the more comely front of Botticelli's Venus), Natural Flooring, a florist called The Wild Bunch, a kids' clothing store dubbed Neck and Neck. After she died, in the neurotic sediment of her diaries and journals – forty years of minutely described sexual obsession and phobia – I found lists of these: 'The Mane Event', 'Hair Today'; punning retail concerns had preoccupied her. Why, Mother? Oh, why?

At Richmond Bridge the Riverside development is to my right: a grotesque confabulation of old and new-tricked-out-as-old. The nineteenth-century town hall, the eighteenth-century Heron House, Laxton's 1856 Italianate Tower House – all have been soldered together by an awful mucilage of Georgian-cum-Palladian office bollix, complete with cupolas and columns aplenty. Nine thousand nine hundred square metres of office space in all, falling down to the river in series of terraces; grassy ghats upon which the bourgeoisie should rightfully be burnt alive for sanctioning such ugliness at all. It's courtesy of the 'architect' Quinlan Terry, natch, pseudo-artificer by appointment to Chuck 'HRH' Windsor, who would doubtless concur with his protégé that 'Modernism is a sign of the fall from grace'.

It's suitable that this – my first and last Thames crossing – should be mediated on the one hand by Our Tel and on the other by the bridge itself: five pure spans, rendered in Portland stone, completed in 1777, it's the oldest in the burgh. London – as has been remarked – was only a Modernist city a hundred years ago. Ever since, it's been in steady flight from the present, putting on its airbrakes with an anguished howl, landing on the short airstrip provided by a ha-ha, in an imagined, Arcadian past.

And there, standing in the middle of the bridge, as if detached from his own rather less Arcadian past, wearing a khaki anorak and sporting a woolly watch cap, a canvas army surplus rucksack on his shoulder, an Ordnance Survey map poking from his pocket, is Nick Papadimitriou, waiting to wait with me the last nine miles to Heathrow. Nine miles that will take us through territory he knows well: Twickenham and Hounslow Heath, where he botanises and meditates, Feltham, where he did time in borstal. Further on is the site of the new Terminal 5, formerly the Bedfont Court Estate, which Nick has hymned in his own writings as a lost Arcadia of municipal smallholdings. Here, at Richmond Bridge, and then, as we walk down the embankment footpath beside Marble Hill Park, my very different land marches with Nick's.

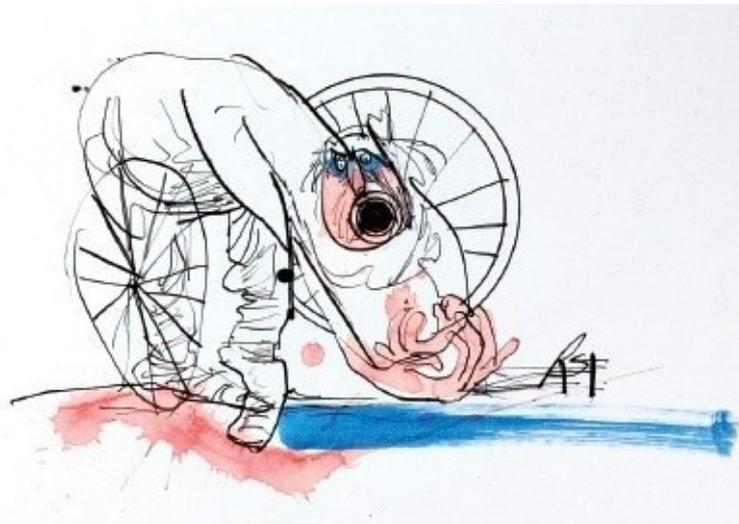
Initially, I can't quite connect with Nick. I'm still lost in my own reveries; shitty little memories. The year before I finally quit drink and drugs, I struggled – like the quadriplegic I then was, all four limbs withered by decades of inanition – to get going. I couldn't yet counsel the notion of actually taking steps, so I flirted with wacky forms of transport. One of these was a Go-Ped, a tiny scooter with a 22cc engine tacked on to it. For a while, officialdom could not even apprehend these oddities, and I caromed about town on mine, to score on the corner of Oakley Street in Chelsea.

A maroon Ford Mondeo, the dealer at the wheel. He styled himself 'Andy', but we all knew his real name was Anand. Two of white, one of brown. Dropped from his mouth into my palm. Wife and kids away for the weekend – out of sight is out of mind for junkies. Hell, *in sight* is also out of mind. But I couldn't just get stoned any more; there was too much guilt, denial wasn't a river in Egypt any more.

it was the Wandle, diverted through my own back garden.

So, I got loaded and drove my Go-Ped along the river to Richmond, believing this to be a health outing. All the way, on a hot summer's day, sweating through Mortlake, annoying families with its ghastly whine. I gave up at Our Tel's dreadful Riverside uglification and took a black cab home. Pity poor me. Inward bound, or as my family had every reason to scream: 'Duck! Incoming fuckwit!'

More than a decade earlier I had held the implausible job title of 'Senior Playleader', and worked the adventure playground in Marble Hill Park. It was run by the Greater London Council, which held suzerainty over great swathes of the city's parkland. But that was then; like the evanescent empire of Alexander the Great, the GLC – London's only citywide governmental body – had disappeared, banished by Thatcher, the Finchley demagogue. The only relevant continuum, between 1985 and 1990, was my own smack habit.



I can see the adventure playground as Nick and I walk beside the river, past the implausible bashes of what must be river gypsies, longhairs with weedy tresses, temporarily run aground. See it, but it looks run down, in all probability by the local authority that took it over when the GLC folded. Adventure playgrounds – a peculiarly London phenomenon; the kinder-torture-gardens of the Blitz, established on bomb sites in the 1950s. They were always harum-scarum places, the apparatus tossed together out of railway sleepers and sections of telegraph poles. Six-inch nails planted in them, rusted hooks to catch urban sprats.

I loved them when I was a kid – the kids I supervised in the mid-1980s loved them quite as much, but they couldn't survive the safety industry, oh no. An industry still nascent on the baking afternoons in July 1985, when I left the kids and the rest of the staff, grouped round a black and white TV, and in the full, ruddy colour of my VW Scirocco GTi (given to me by a wealthy friend, later sold for a small ounce of cocaine), drove at speeds well in excess of 80 mph, back to the flat in Kensington that was another part of the same friend's largesse. While 1.5 billion people in one hundred countries watched – live! – Midge Ure yodel 'Ooooooh, Vienna!' I had a hit of smack, and then drove back out to Marble Hill, all in under an hour.

There was a retarded kid called Phil – now, I daresay, he'd have special needs, but then he ran roaring, around the adventure playground, a great lummoX in a duffel coat, even on the hottest afternoons, bellowing at the other kids, who screamed and taunted. Care in the community was afforded both of us. Happy days, no?

Nick and I pass by Marble Hill House, a delightful Palladian villa built for some kingly mistress or another. Pope visited, Walpole visited – I've never been in. But then I've been to Agra and not the Taj Mahal, Grenada and not the Alhambra. Addiction can do that to you, clamp on the brick-wall blinker.

so that for decades you trot around in circles, wherever you may be. I've awoken now, in my forties, find myself in an unexplored sylvan glade. Is it any wonder I can't stop pacing forwards? ———

Actually, thank the gods for Nick, because this internal monologue is getting too jittery and too involved: a convolvulus of fact, memory and fancy; a palimpsest rubbed up out of smudged and scarred neurones. My feet are tangling up in its denim warp and cheesecloth weft. Let's tune out – and tune in again. These are the topics Nick addresses as we draw abreast of Eel Pie Island – implausibly epicentre of the British blues revival of the 1960s – then deviate from the Thames into Church Street, Twickenham – where I have a beef sandwich on brown, and Nick a prawn on white – then tread on along Heath Road.



Timothy Leary, was he entirely bogus? Can there be any equivalence between mystical ecstasy and psychotropic drug experiences? Corvid intelligence, is it wholly unknowable? Environmental anxiety – the tendency people now have to react to any untoward weather with cries of ‘It’s global warming’ – is this, in fact, a projection of other, more perennial anxieties? Frothy rivers in London – why do they froth? Nick’s resounding affection for Philip Larkin’s *The Whitsun Weddings* – ‘I thought of London spread out in the sun / Its postal districts packed like squares of wheat . . .’ That 1970s anachronism or so it seems to Nick, who finds his tolerance for the *niqab* and imported theocracy fast declining. ‘No Platform for Racists or Fascists’. A murder in Barnet – or rather, several, for he’s working on a book cataloguing them: an Edwardian, gay *crime passionnel* on the East End Road in Finchley; illiterate throwback tramps hacking each other to death on in 1930s Edgware; a 1950s gangland shootout in Finchley High Road; the skeletons of numerous babies found buried in the garden of a house in East Finchley at the turn of the nineteenth century.

Nick is, to be frank, irrepressible. He is a walking compendium of fact, opinion and supposition: the great Blue Nile of verbiage, that, when it’s diverted to mingle with my own thoughtful tributaries, completely alters its hue. He’s good to walk with and, over twenty years now, we’ve done a few together. Too few, because in those two decades there have been many long hiatuses: Nick shivering for aeons on suburban station platforms, paralysed on his way to hit on suspicious chemists for codeine linctus, a purloined volume of experimental poetry digging into his hip; and me, another of the seven suburban sleepers, slumbering in some numb, tarry cul-de-sac.

So, thus engaged, we walk along Heath Road, a curving interwar shopping parade, with its mansard roofs and snotty rendering. Past the Twickenham Green Baptist Church, a startling folly: the Gothic envisioned by Orwell’s Gordon Comstock. Hard by it there’s a small shop selling Star Wars costume

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