



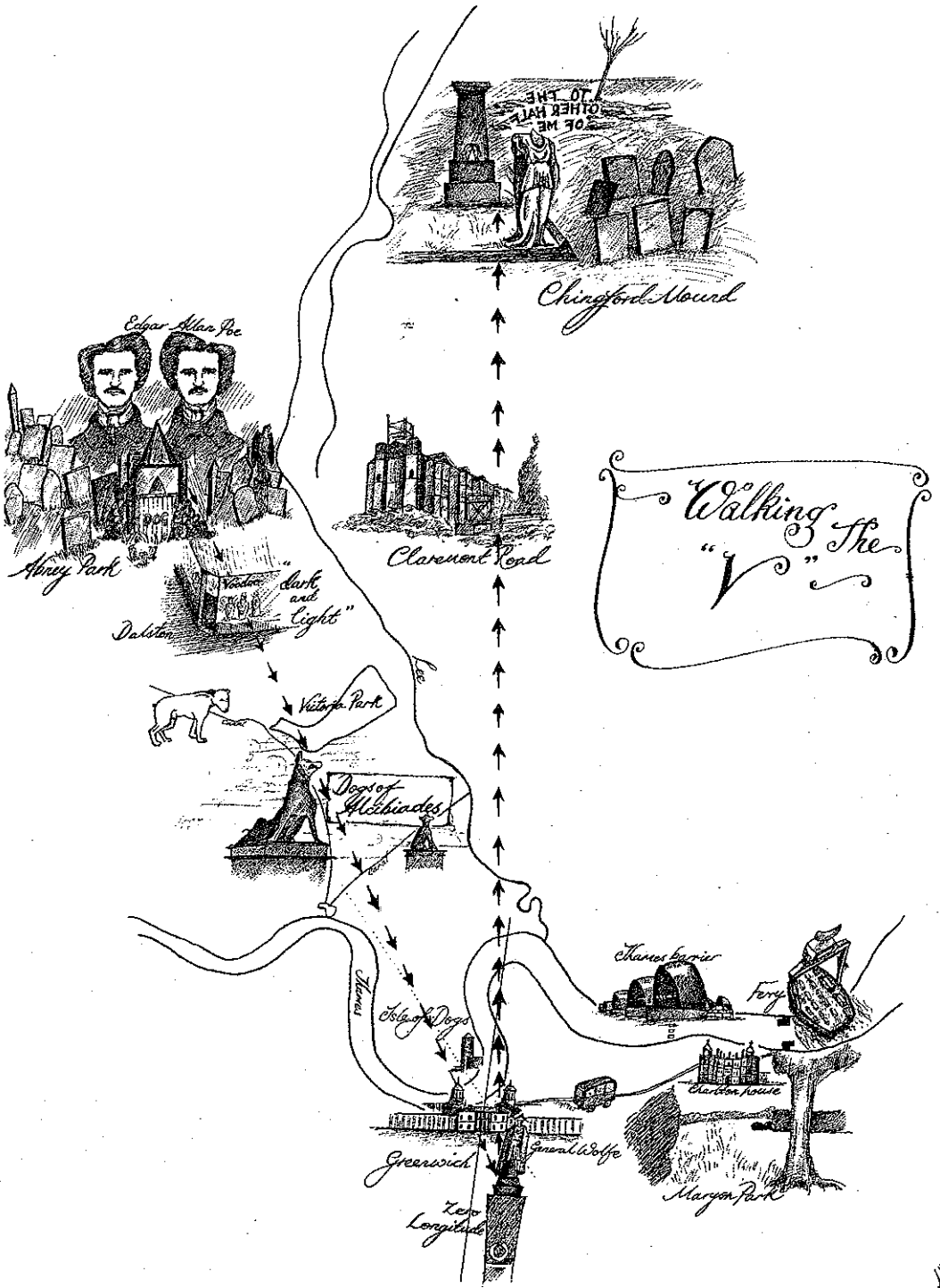
LIGHTS OUT FOR THE TERRITORY

JAIN SINCLAIR

As a critic he is incomparably honest. The opinions of contemporary English writers on nothing and sometimes several things.

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Maryon Park 1978

SKATING ON THIN EYES: THE FIRST WALK

*the magus dee dreams of a stone island in force, dying in poverty,
drunk on angelspeech, which paradoxically, he has not actually heard,
the scales of music tripping upward to evade him in perpetual deferral
to create open outward the place of definition.*

RICHARD MAKIN

The notion was to cut a crude **V** into the sprawl of the city, to vandalise dormant energies by an act of ambulant signmaking. To walk out from Hackney to Greenwich Hill, and back along the River Lea to Chingford Mount, recording and retrieving the messages on walls, lampposts, doorjambs: the spites and spasms of an increasingly deranged populace. (I had developed this curious conceit while working on my novel *Radon Daughters*: that the physical movements of the characters across their territory might spell out the letters of a secret alphabet. Dynamic shapes, with ambitions to achieve a life of their own, quite independent of their supposed author. Railway to pub to hospital: trace the line on the map. These botched runes, burnt into the script in the heat of creation, offer an alternative reading – a subterranean, preconscious text capable of divination and prophecy. A sorcerer's grimoire that would function as a curse or a blessing.)

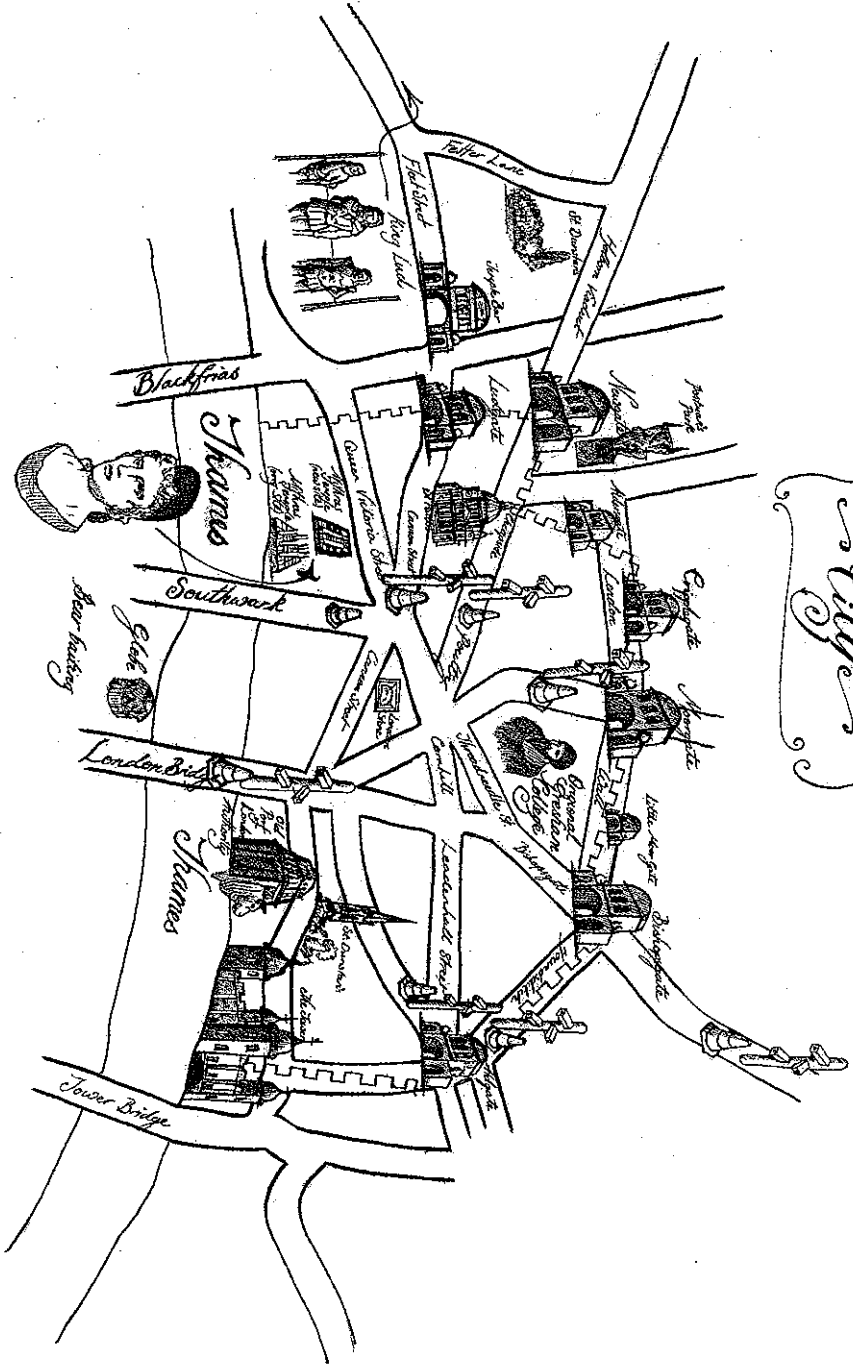
Armed with a cheap notebook, and accompanied by the photographer Marc Atkins, I would transcribe all the pictographs of venom that decorated our near-arbitrary route. The messages were, in truth, unimportant. Urban graffiti is all too often a signature without a document, an anonymous autograph. The tag is everything, as jealously defended as the Coke or Disney decals. Tags are the marginalia of corporate tribalism. Their offence is to parody the most visible aspect of high capitalist black magic. Spraycan bandits, like monks labouring on a Book of Hours, hold to their own patch, refining their art by infinite acts of repetition. The name, unnoticed except by fellow taggers, is a gesture, an assertion: it stands in place of the individual artist who, in giving up his freedom, becomes free. The public autograph is an announcement of

nothingness, abdication, the swift erasure of the envelope of identity. It's like Salvador Dali in his twilight years putting his mark on hundreds of blank sheets of paper, authenticating chaos.

Serial composition: the city is the subject, a fiction that anyone can lay claim to. "We are all artists," they used to cry in the Sixties. Now, for the price of an aerosol, it's true. Pick your view and sign it. Sign events that have not yet happened. (Take a stroll down somewhere like Catherine Wheel Alley, off Bishopsgate, and see the future revealed on a wall of white tiles. Superimposed fantasies. Scarlet swastikas swimming back to the surface. The Tourette's syndrome ravings of an outwardly reformed city. A private place, a narrow passage, in which to let out all the overtly disguised racist bile. The madness has to find somewhere to run wild. Obscene formulae incubating terrorist bombs. Runnels and enclosed ditches where unwaged scribes are at last free of the surveillance cameras.) Remember postal art, *Fluxus*? All that European and transatlantic bumph now consigned to a bunker beneath the Tate Gallery? Graffiti is the Year Zero version.

The tagger, the specialist who leaves his mark on a wall, is a hit and run calligrapher – probably young, MTV-grazing and male. His art is nomadic, a matter of quantity not quality. As often as not, the deed is carried out on the way back from a club in the early hours of the morning; the announcement of a jagged progress across home territory. Nothing too bulky to carry, a good black felt-tip pen in the pocket of your Pucca jeans will do the trick. The pseudonymous signature is rapidly perfected: Soxi, Coe, Sub, Hemp. Standards are rather more demanding than in Bond Street. Earlier efforts, already in place, if they are deemed inadequate, will be deleted with a single stroke. White boy business. Middle-class cultural diffusionism. The walls that have been set aside as open-air galleries, sites where aerosol activity is encouraged or at least tolerated, don't cut it. "Sign Park" in an estate off Tufnell Park Road, although it features constantly evolving monster murals, is not considered a serious option. Your tag will all too soon be worked over, obliterated. Taggers can be solitaries, but, more frequently, they hang out in teams or crews. The tag represents a corporate identity; not so much a gang as a studio or "school of". Battles are not territorial; the climate here is clubbish, mildly hallucinogenic. Inner-city impressionists who have moved on from the posthumous representation of light and pleasure. Everything happens in the present tense. No history, no future. There is no interference with subject. Fragments of London are perceived as Polaroid epiphanies; signed and abandoned. The tag is the

Peter



record of a fleeting instant of inspiration. "Eas-y!" The more upwardly mobile careerists might attack a tube train, but most settle for walls and doorways, customised hoardings. Sprayed messages are meaningless, having no programme beyond the announcement of a non-presence. Night scrawls, minimal adjustments to the psychic skin of the city. The grander aerosol paintings, known as "pieces", are altogether too flash, baroque, an art in decline. They draw attention to themselves, thereby neutralising their greatest strength – invisibility. They solicit photographic reproduction, a collaboration with Warhol-tendency vampires. The plain tag is a purist's form. Satisfaction is derived from getting your hit into some high risk location, a dangerous bridge climbed in heart-pumping, post-rave excitement. The clubbing tagger's E-vision is an authentic urban experience: an enforced homeward walk across a lucid wilderness from Barking or Brixton, sunrise over the industrial alps of Stratford East. That's as near as they are ever going to come to it, unsolicited satori. Hemp, an American exile, who arrived here from New York in the wake of a 500 dollar fine, enjoys a toke, a session with the chillum. In reflective mood, he meditates on the relationship between tagging and skate-boarding. He drifts backwards and forwards, enacting complicated figures, over a South London parking lot: "If you're going to be around the city all the time, you'd better put your name up."

As newspapers have atrophied into the playthings of grotesque megalomaniacs, uselessly shrill exercises in mind-control, so disenfranchised authors have been forced to adapt the walls to playful collages of argument and invective. Not the publicly displayed, and quietly absorbed, papers of the Chinese, but editorials of madness. Texts that nobody is going to stop and read. Unchallenged polemics. My own patch in Hackney has been mercilessly colonised by competing voices from elsewhere: Kurds, Peruvians, Irish, Russians, Africans. Contour lines of shorthand rhetoric asserting the borders between different areas of influence. Graffiti could, I hoped, be read like a tidemark. In the course of our walk we'd find precisely where the "Freedom" of Dursan Karatas gave way to the "Innocence" of George Davis – OK. (Yes, George is still getting a result, the benefit of the doubt from the railway bridges of East London – long after being caught in the act during a raid on the Bank of Cyprus in Seven Sisters Road, Holloway. For over twenty years Davis has woken to find himself framed by DS Mathews. Thus proving that graffiti has a half-life far in excess of the buildings on which they have been painted. Broken sentences and forgotten names wink like fossils among the ruins.)

Walking is the best way to explore and exploit the city; the changes, shifts, breaks in the cloud helmet, movement of light on water. Drifting purposefully is the recommended mode, tramping asphalted earth in alert reverie, allowing the fiction of an underlying pattern to reveal itself. To the no-bullshit materialist this sounds suspiciously like *fin-de-siècle* decadence, a poetic of entropy – but the born-again *flâneur* is a stubborn creature, less interested in texture and fabric, eavesdropping on philosophical conversation pieces, than in noticing *everything*. Alignments of telephone kiosks, maps made from moss on the slopes of Victorian sepulchres, collections of prostitutes' cards, torn and defaced promotional bills for cancelled events at York Hall, visits to the homes of dead writers, bronze casts on war memorials, plaster dogs, beer mats, concentrations of used condoms, the crystalline patterns of glass shards surrounding an imploded BMW quarter-light window, meditations on the relationship between the brain damage suffered by the super-middleweight boxer Gerald McClellan (lights out in the Royal London Hospital, Whitechapel) and the simultaneous collapse of Barings, bankers to the Queen. Walking, moving across a retreating townscape, stitches it all together: the illicit cocktail of bodily exhaustion and a raging carbon monoxide high.

Graffiti is the only constant on these fantastic journeys, random codices, part sign and part language. Recording as many of these fractured compositions as we could find along a given route from Hackney to Greenwich to Chingford would be like editing an unpredictable anthology. The walk could become a phantom biopsy, cutting out a sample of diseased tissue without an anaesthetic. But, more importantly, it would also pay homage to a series of famous Lea Valley "temperature traverses", undertaken as part of a survey of London's climate, between October 1958 and November 1959. TJ Chandler, in his book *The Climate of London* (1965), describes the curious set-up:

The instrumentation of the original traverses consisted of electrical resistance thermometers housed in double-louvred radiation shields suspended from the roof-rack of a car so that the element in the lower shield was 4ft and that in the upper shield was 5ft above the ground and 6 in. from the side of the car. Temperatures in the first few feet above road surfaces seem, in fact, to be surprisingly uniform and the precise height of the instrument is less critical than might be supposed . . .

Any warming of the elements by the car engine would naturally invalidate the readings. This problem has sometimes proved difficult

(Godske, quoted by Sundborg, 1952, p.53), but in the present investigation the position of the radiation shield and elements in relation to the engine and airflow over the car, plus a thick pad of glass fibre over the car bonnet, prevented any warming. It was sought, in general, to keep the car speed to 20 mi/hr . . . Except on a few noted occasions, speeds were sufficient to secure adequate ventilation of the elements without being too great to induce dynamic warming.

This outwardly eccentric Dr Who-style progress, zigzagging by day and night from Liverpool Street and Canning Town up the Lea Valley to Ware, struck me as a paradigm for any visionary exploration of the Essex fringes. An apparently scientific excuse for a glorious clandestine folly, joyriding the trail of the cosmic serpent. As with alchemy, it's never the result that matters; it's the time spent on the process, the discipline of repetition. Enlightened boredom.

Our proposed walk was far too neat. The implication of the vulgarity of the sign I intended to inflict on East London screamed for some last moment revision. The project had nothing to do with Thomas Pynchon ("He walked; walked, he thought sometimes . . . his only function to want"). Pynchon's 1963 novel, *V.*, in any case, was always followed by an assertive period. **V.** (I did once toy with the idea of collecting an alphabet library: from "A" by Louis Zukofsky, through John Berger's *G* and *The Story of O*, to *Z*, the novelisation of the Costa-Gavras film.)

Arrangements in place, the evening before the walk, I was still worrying at the details of the scheme, hoping for some accident to bring about a final revision. Rummaging through the chaos of my desk, the bills, unanswered letters, unsolicited typescripts, fliers for last season's poetry readings, I discovered an invitation, six months out of date, to attend the inauguration, in Seminar Room 178, Technology Faculty, University of Greenwich, of *seminarium*; "a permanent site-specific installation" by Richard Makin.

Makin was given complete freedom regarding the site and the nature of the piece . . . The piece is textual and is condensed from the site's appellation, the artist working with the constraints of synonyms, associations and the etymology of the compounded words seminar room. These served to focus heterogeneous responses to the subject environment and its broader surroundings and were instrumental in producing a poetic constellation.

evoking various motifs correlational to the function of that environment. The yield is an equivocal conjunction intended to instigate a pondering and contemplation of simultaneously the presented semantic arrangement and the functions of the host space, the receiver situated within this weave of locus and stream of words that have emerged from the nominative of a particular physical domain: a transparent and resonant superimposition of word and place.

How could I resist? Makin's artwork fitted so neatly alongside the theme of the moment. I *had* to go for it – sponsored graffiti of the most elevated kind. This character Makin, whose name I had previously noticed in the modernist periodical *Parataxis*, had been invited to creatively deface the wall of a new university. Here was graffiti of a previously unrecognised sort – indoor graffiti, premeditated spontaneity. A legitimate sibling of the invitations left on the doors of public conveniences, those capital-letter jokes trailing forlornly towards a puddled floor. It was unlikely, I thought, that Makin had got out his paint can, stencil set and ruler, to do the business himself. Could he, as a sponsor of secondhand graffiti, be included in our collection? There must have been faculty meetings, proposals, justifications, budgets, costings of material and labour. Then there was the style of the lettering: had some hireling David Jones or Eric Gill been found in the borough? Makin's room would be the pivot on which our route march would swing.

The bureaucratic comedy began as soon as I picked up the telephone. Making contact with the University of Greenwich, I was passed from department to department, secretary to impersonal assistant. It was that awkward time of the afternoon when the sun skulks listlessly over the horizon. I could hear tea-cups being pointedly clinked. I felt the uncomfortable warmth of the central heating, the flickering interference of strip-lighting that reduces humans to a species of desktop cacti. All knowledge of the mysterious Richard Makin and his art project was strenuously denied. The University of Greenwich, it was implied, was not that kind of place. I persisted in my folly. The Technology Faculty *did* exist, the clerks would go that far. But who was I? Who did I represent? What was the name of my company? I grew peevish. I quoted the original invitation. And the fact that Makin openly admitted that he was prepared to "read and talk about his work". "All are welcome" stated an official handout that bore the letter-heading of the School of Mathematics, Statistics and Scientific Computing; to say nothing of the

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sponsoring names of Professors Mark Cross, DSc, CMath, FIMA, Martin G Everett, DPhil, Edwin Galea, PhD, Keith Rennolls, MSc, CStat, MICFor. Four professors were up for this and the functionaries were still giving me a hard time. The tea-cups were replenished. The clerks weakened. The room *might* be visited, between strictly regulated hours, but there was still no Makin in the computer. The man was a freelance, a floater.

By now, of course, *seminarium* had become the quest, an absolute necessity. I must have sounded crazy enough for them to act before I turned up in their openplan office with a knapsack of gelignite. Makin rang me. He would be in Seminar Room 178 between eleven-thirty and twelve-thirty on the following morning, prepared to curate his achievement. This was a double-edged blessing. We had an achievable goal for our walk but we were lumbered with an unwelcome time-base. I never like that. Time on these excursions should be allowed to unravel at its own speed, that's the whole point of the exercise. To shift away from the culture of consumption into a meandering stream. Cut those wires.

The walk had received its arbitrary revision. There was a proper target, while the second stage, the return leg, could look after itself. (At this point, I dug deeper into the tilth on the margins of my desk and uncovered the typescript of an earlier Makin text, *the curve of forgetting*. I dived into it at random: "duped by the record of signs upon endless walls". Makin, back in December 1992, lived in the shadow of the obelisk of St Luke's Old Street. Home territory. Our conjunction was even stranger than I had supposed: we would both be travelling, twin arms of a compass, south-east across London, to meet in a transgressed seminar room.)

Another call. (Have you noticed how these things come in clusters? Like buses. The instrument, once activated, alerts other potential communicators, triggers off a chain reaction. Call it morphic resonance, or Secret State interference in the electromagnetic field, and switch on the answer-machine.) An audibly distressed woman, a writer, enraged by a sense of her powerlessness in the face of near-demonic forces, has to protest, describe, articulate her feelings about the M11 motorway extension. The battle of Claremont Road. What to *do*? The things that have been going on. Things she has seen. Dawn raids. Executed trees. Why is this unreported by the media? Why doesn't someone tell the *real* story? There's no specific request to make of me, no demand. But. Before it's too late. She will. Get it down. Herself. The truth.

Evening sunlight was polishing the grain of my grandfather's desk, bleaching the pinks in the John Bellany watercolour. It was my turn to abuse the phone, summon Marc Atkins from his darkroom. If we were to get to the University of Greenwich by late morning, we would have to knock off Abney Park Cemetery tonight. You can't visit the dead before 9 am. Already the "purity" of the V had been despoiled. Good. That's promising. If our pilgrimage is not to disintegrate into a marathon trot we have to walk out of the door without further hesitation.

2.

ALBION DRIVE E8. TO ABNEY PARK, STOKE NEWINGTON.

EVENING OF 24/10/94.

The important fact about urban living: the continued stream of second attention awareness. Every licence plate, street sign, passing strangers, are saying something to you.

WILLIAM S. BURROUGHS

Easily into our stride, I'm explaining the whole insane concept to Marc: on the hoof. No time for maps and bearings. He handles these feverish speculations with practised ease. God knows what he really thinks. Or who he is. Not "Marc Atkins", this much he will admit. Another volunteer orphan, a self-invented man with an interestingly labyrinthine personal life; postal systems that require a network of dead-letter drops. He's a shavenheaded vegetarian giant, a near-Brummie. That's already more than any reasonable person would want to discover. Give him a camera to frame out the rest of the world and he's happy. Promise him a free breakfast and the chance of running into a squall of long-legged black women and he'll walk through fire.

At the end of Albion Square, beyond the clutch of houses that have been built over the Nimby battleground of a fruitlessly defended green space, is a stunted obelisk set on a carpet of stone flags. Its octagonal base serves as somewhere to sit for those who take advantage of the Duke of Wellington's barbecue night, a stand for lager cans. The concrete shield from which the obelisk rises is patterned with a network of juvenile footprints. The site is shaded by a sycamore umbrella and frisky with the dance of leaf-light. The shadow of the obelisk, in the late afternoon,