DAVID FULTON

Running for Life: Valentine’s Park

(In memoriam Denise Levertov, daughter of Ilford, who communed with spirits in the park.)

(i)
Mad? Maybe.
Masochistic? Perhaps.
But just set
your heavy head,
tight leaden sinews,
on a jogging rack
and let your body
stretch
into the dawn.
Soon oxygen will lighten,
loosen
your whole frame,
then how easily
you’ll slip the straps of pain,
relaxing to a joy
that rises, rises
till it leaves you
training air—high!

(ii)
The morning run—
every day:
Saturday, Sunday,
weekday,
sick day, strain day,
birthday, bank holiday,
even Christmas Day
when gates stay chained,
but railing-gaps
gape
for a quick squeeze
   to fenced liberty.)

   (iii)
Summer: ten past six.
   Winter: ten-to-seven.
Running from Ilford’s
   bourgeois ease
(unlikely),
   unmortgaged house
(semi-detached),
   loving wife
(fully attached,
   I hope),
and child at fifty
   (bizarre);
surprising fox and cub,
   fire eyes swivelling
from tipped bins,
   ripped refuse bags,
sturdy legs hurling a red blur
   at green cover;
running up Cranbrook Road
   past solitary bus-stop waiters
in rain, in snow,
   darkness and first light
to skirt the Square,
   Ilford’s brief “village,”
houses standing back
   in smug satisfaction;
approaching park gates
   under concrete urns
that lean to ask
   a classic question,
   “Why are you
   dying to run
when all you are doing
   is running to die?”
Pushing creaking iron
   apart
to kick the cinder path
   past Valentine’s House,
our East India shyster’s
   listed chateau
(first entrant to Love
   or Trade’s demesne?),
so many bijou boughs,
   homeless leaves,
so much enclosed earth,
   common grass.
No, not locked, 
surely!
Park-keepers
still asleep
or will that mythical dog,
figured at the gate—
“patrolled area:
beware!”—
finally find flesh
to uncurl lips
and launch its snarled incisors
at my wrists?
No! No panting slobber,
no ominous pads
make horror music
in the shadows.
Relax:
the grounds are yours,
the air is icy blue-black,
the moon a sliver,
and one shooting star—
Boeing? UFO?—
moves silently
across the sky—
to Stansted
or deep space?

Race down
your narrow tarmac
into the lamp’s
yellow glow,
shooting beyond
your breath barrier
as you re-enter the dark;
or tread
through midsummer treacle,
wind rollers
and the rain’s
bead curtains
in thigh defiance
of a world’s weather;
then whenever air’s
intangible
force singlet, shorts, shoes—
everything!—
through what can
no longer resist.

(vi)
Why not jog over the bridge,
breaking that pack of geese
as you accelerate
round the lake’s rising curve,
then duck through rhododendrons
to a smaller bridge,
opening on acres
of downhill grass?
Yes, chase the fleeing horizon
till you lose
or freewheel into a sun,
Martian red
over ankle mist,
but take the keepers’ hut
for turn
and lean hard into the home run.
The incline will leave
you panting
like a dog
at dogs
that emerge
from half light
(raw slaves,
held by collar and chain),
barking back at their barks,
blissed out—Barking mad.

(vii)
Spurt up the street
those last one hundred yards
through car tunnels,
glass-sealed from glory,
the pigeons’ dry departing clap,
your only applause;
breast the invisible tape,
putting leg breaks on
like indoor sprinters
at the wall.
Then gulp triumphant air,
head endorphin-high,
flesh free from pain,
tired, yet so richly calm.
Well, are you now
fit for life,
ready, willing
to run down another day?