

## 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.

(iv)

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?

(v)

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?