

CANNING

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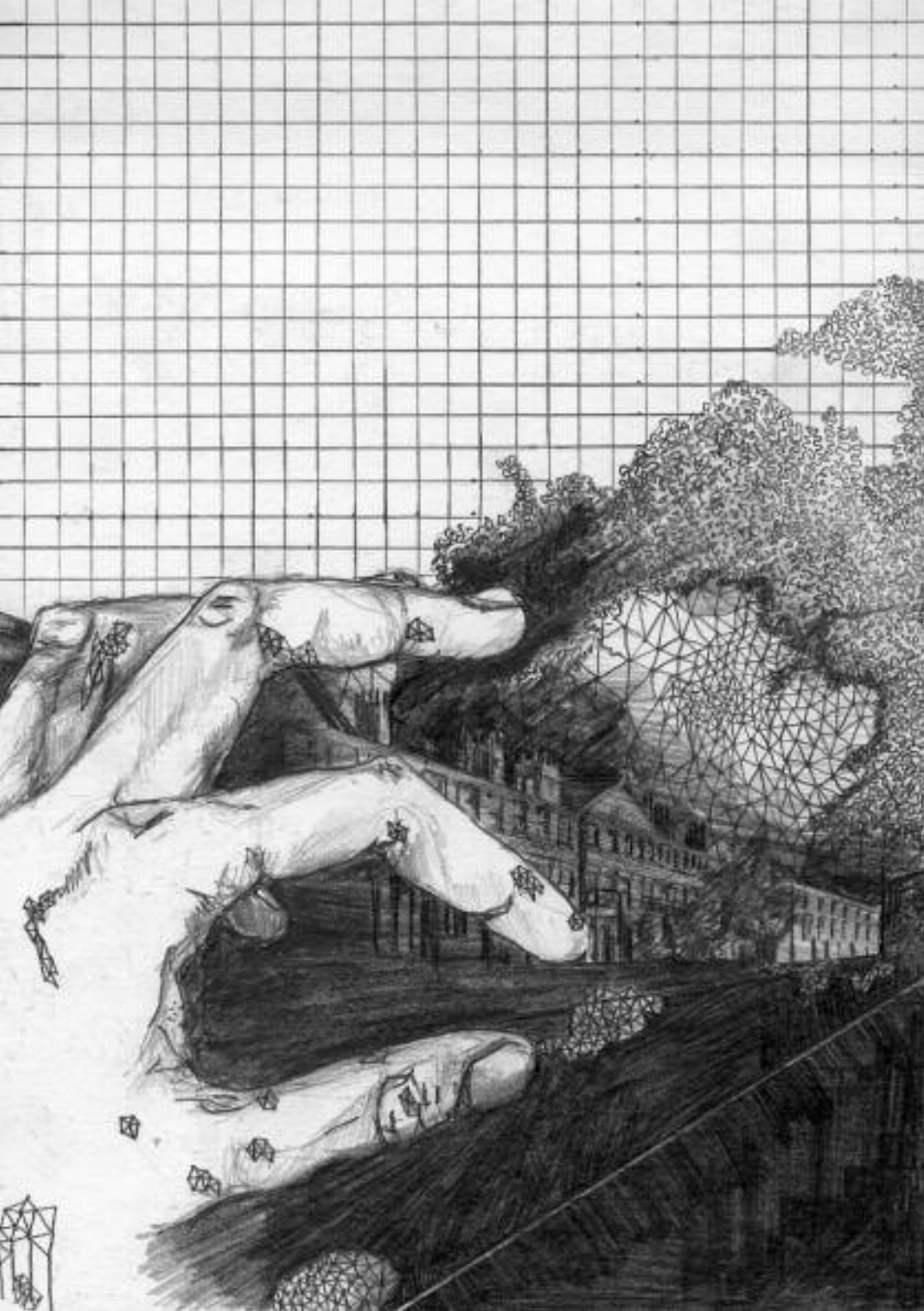


INTRODUCTION

This is a collection of writing and illustration created over the last few years that is loosely inspired by the Canning area of Liverpool 8, sometimes referred to as 'the Georgian Quarter'.

It is not, and is not intended to be, a factual representation of the area. Rather it is an attempt at 'Psychogeography', or something thereabouts, with Canning as the instigator of the ideas contained within.

We could write many things about why we were inspired so much by this area, but it's probably best revealed by reading it.



CANNING # 1

The sweat, building for so long, finally pushes its way through my brow as I near the top of the hill. I glance down at the city as I turn from it, see its glow; traces of people, light, movement and sound, then head on quickly into the island.

I saw them behind me in town. I don't know which one it was, there are so many now, but I know they're coming for me.

I'm in Canning now, though, my sanctuary for so long. Here, the people get less, the light gets less, the traffic gets less. Reality gets less. The world slows down. I'm not sure how much longer it can protect me though.

It's a strange part of the city, this, and it can be a paradise or a prison depending on the time of day. It has a stillness that betrays its proximity to the centre of things. Nothing seems real, but then life at its meanest stares you in the face. It's a separate dimension, neither past nor future, where the normal rules of engagement do not apply.

Its roads lead to all paths, and many roads lead to it. There's a thousand different people here, with a thousand different views of what this place means. Some have always been here, trying to get out since day one. Others stumble in and never leave. Once part of the rhythm, you know when to keep your head down and when to sing to the world; when to talk and when to run. Me, I came here cos I knew I could hide from the storm I had created. Now though, it seems they follow me even to here.

For all the people crammed into this little island, we rarely see one another. The occasional glimpse, the odd insult traded across the street, is the only communication. You go on alone, unable to see anything of the road behind or the path up ahead. Anything more would reveal, and we've all got our own secrets. That's all that unites us. But I don't fear those thousand eyes — only the half-dozen footsteps coming from behind.

You can find shelter here, but you're also vulnerable. By day, it is a benign oasis, after dark though, it's a place of many ghosts. The only things that break the stillness are the strange, unidentifiable sounds of the night and the traces left by those cutting through. All the mad, bad energy of the city gets stored up here in these old stones and, after dark, it all spills out and flows freely through the streets and alleys.

Even here, though, you can only hide for so long. The only respite is the pubs. Little yellow glowing dens, stop-offs and social clubs for the misfits and the pissheads. Places where everyone knows your name and how much money you owe them, and the darkness is hidden beneath bitter ale and wit.. You can always hide in those pubs for a time, they'll accept anyone.

In the end though, even past lock-ins, you've got to go back out onto those streets. And the dark wave of clouds that was approaching when you went inside has long since turned to absolute black and the lines of dim, old street lamps do not comfort at all.

You're alone with your thoughts up here. It's good for the imagination, but paranoia can take over. When you know you're being pursued, there's not much else you can do but keep on moving. I've been running for so long now though; I've forgotten what it's like to be still.

They're coming, I can fucking hear them. Keep on going, that's all you can do. Don't look back, keep up the big strides and the gritted teeth and push on forward through the night.

I used to live free you see. How I fucking ran. Since I was young I was determined they'd never catch me, none of them. They hide in every corner, but I was quick and wise. Oh how I fucking ran.

If you live like that though, you end up owing a lot of people favours. You make a lot of enemies and bad blood flows all around you. You get older and keeping free is gets harder. My options slimmed and Canning called me to hide between its ancient walls and big black doors.

So here I am, skulking about everywhere, fearing for my soul on my short walk home. Collar up. Watch your back, especially on this stretch.

They're still coming, closing in. I can sense their approach, but gone are the days when it would have been possible for me to escape. I'm slowing, but still sharp enough to evade them that little bit longer. On your own, life is harder, colder, but you move quicker. Quicker through these long, deep stretches of time and memory.

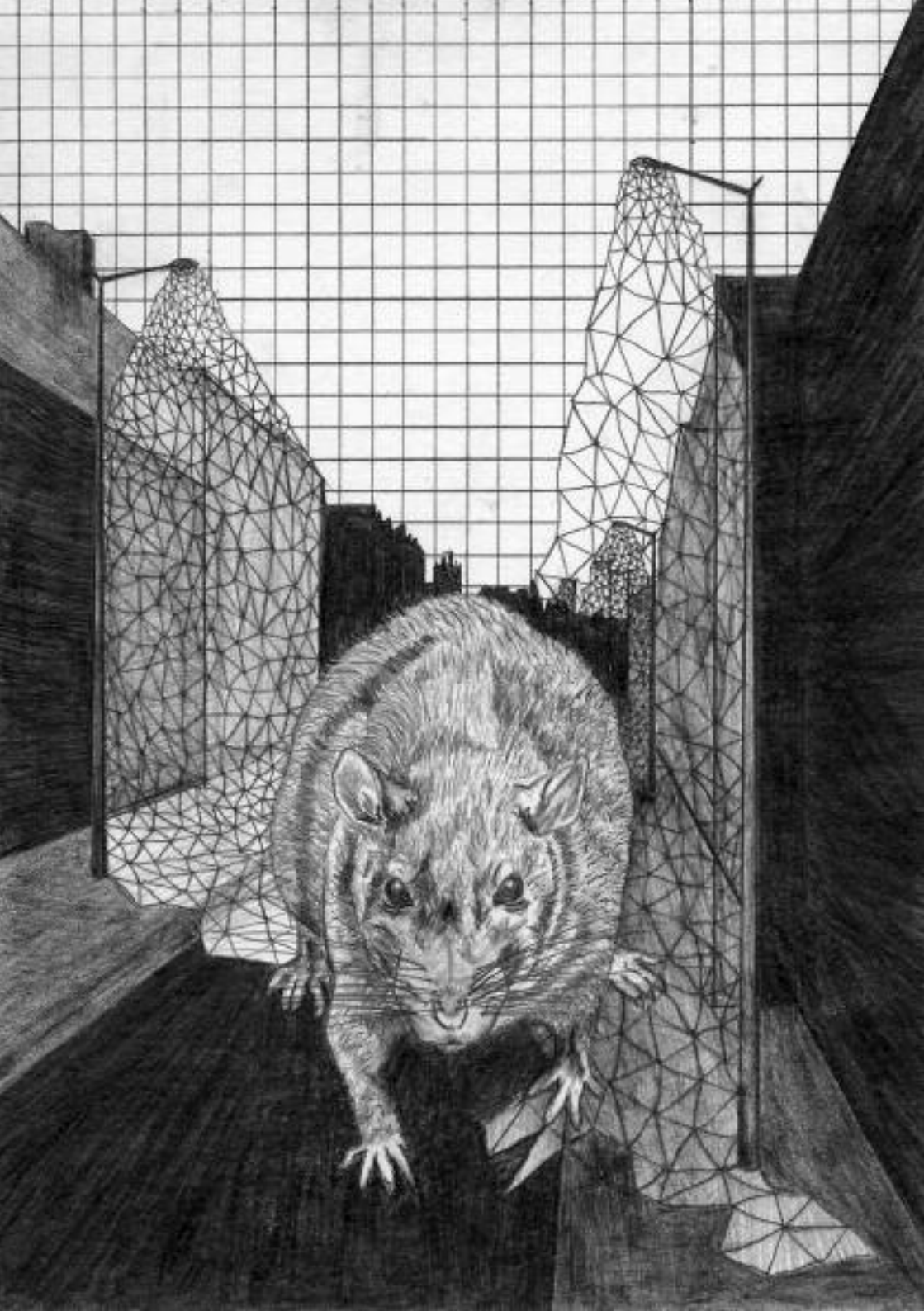
Easy now, a solitary figure approaches in the distance. Is he more scared of me than I am of him? Hood up, head down, but so is mine, so is everyone around here and you never know if it's in defence or plan of attack. My hand goes down into my jeans pocket and grips around the keys, if all else fails a Yale in the eye is a good move. My whole being tenses as the distance closes between us, every sense is heightened, focused on this one approaching body. Steps louder till we're in lunging distance, I can hear his breath increasing.

As he passes me by a wide margin, all anxiety flows out. You can't be prepared all the time — that'll kill you faster than they will. I'm nearing my corner now, brighter, more welcoming. A car goes past, too fast to be of any worry. Still, it's too quiet. To me, that's never good. No city should have anywhere this silent on its books. This place is alien. That's why I fit in. Why we all fit in here.

And it seems, here I am back at my very own big black door. Nobody is lurking in the shadows, just me alone in the Canning of the night.

Now the only thing I have to face is the one thing I never could.

Myself.



THE RAT

"Eh look. They've only gone and got rid of that bloody rat."

"Ya wha?"

"You know, the big fuck-off rat painted on the side of the old pub there."

"Oh yeah, it's disappeared aint it? Weird."

"Not fucking weird. I bet it was the fucking Council painted it out. Wouldn't know culture if it bit them on the arse. It was great that, I bet they're just going to build more flats on it now."

"Well, I always thought it looked more like a cat to be honest."

"Aaaaaarrrrrrrrggghh!"

There, wrapped halfway around the Chinese arch and illuminated in the night by the neon of the restaurants, was a real, live, 10ft rat with glinting eyes.

"OhJesusGodNOOOO!"

"Bloody 'ell. Eh, that stuff we were smoking before must be well strong."

"IT'SFUCKINGREALdon'tYOUSEEMAN!"

They turned and ran back towards the cathedral. The rat then slipped down the arch, much to the surprise of a businessman coming out of one of the basements of Chinatown. He figured it was some sort of divine message and resolved then to cut down on the gambling and spend more time with his family. Something he would have done if he hadn't been immediately knocked down and killed by a Hackney cab on Park Road while pondering what he had just seen.

The rat slinked down Duke Street with its shoulders shifting hard, panning its head left and right to observe, its fur rippling slightly in the breeze from the river.

Its presence surprised a couple of art students passing by, but they assumed it to be part of the Biennial:

"Is it something to do with the Chinese heritage?"

"Maybe it's meant to be a representation of the underclass?"

As the rat passed a high-class restaurant, it ducked and glanced through its large windows. Its appearance caused much furore and the usual sophisticated hum and gentle clinking was replaced by much screaming and crashing. Unmoved, it carried on.

A homeless man wandered into the main road from an alley and came face to face with the rat. They both halted and pondered each other for a moment. The man nodded and stepped to one side. The rat moved on.

It stalked through the city, dipping in and out of the sodium streetlights and the darkness till it reached the edge of Concert Square and looked in. Its appearance startled the odd individual, but ultimately elicited little excitement as most revellers thought it was part of some sort of promotion for a club night. One punter tumbled up to the rat, dug it in the side and remarked, "You're a big lad aren't ya?" The rat twitched, turned around and slipped into the back streets again, moving off in the direction of the river.

One man in a state of some inebriation decided to follow it onto Seel Street, but then dropped to the gutter to vomit. Wiping his mouth he was shocked to see a small rat run underneath him and he leapt back in horror as a second rodent dashed past. A rumbling troubled his left ear and he turned to see a squeaking, black, fluctuating, mass coming down the road.



FLANNERY'S BAR

In an old public house in the late afternoon, the air is filled with dust seen easily in the thin light from the high frosted window. A fireplace, black and hammered brass, contains a small, deep red glow and a solitary man sits with a pint of stout and stares into the middle distance.

In another corner, they sit around a round table, and sink ever deeper into battered leather and upholstery. Laughing and chatting and chinking glass after glass. Loud banter and quick wit filled with a thousand puns and piss takes colours the air as the light fades outside.

Night closes in and, as the drinks get stronger, control gets weaker and the tragedy of the individual soul seeps out between sips of golden glasses. Utterances reveal lost loves, distant children, missed opportunities, new deaths, re-opened old wounds, cheating and lying, lying and cheating. All drowned in drink, but a deeper clarity creeps through the haze.

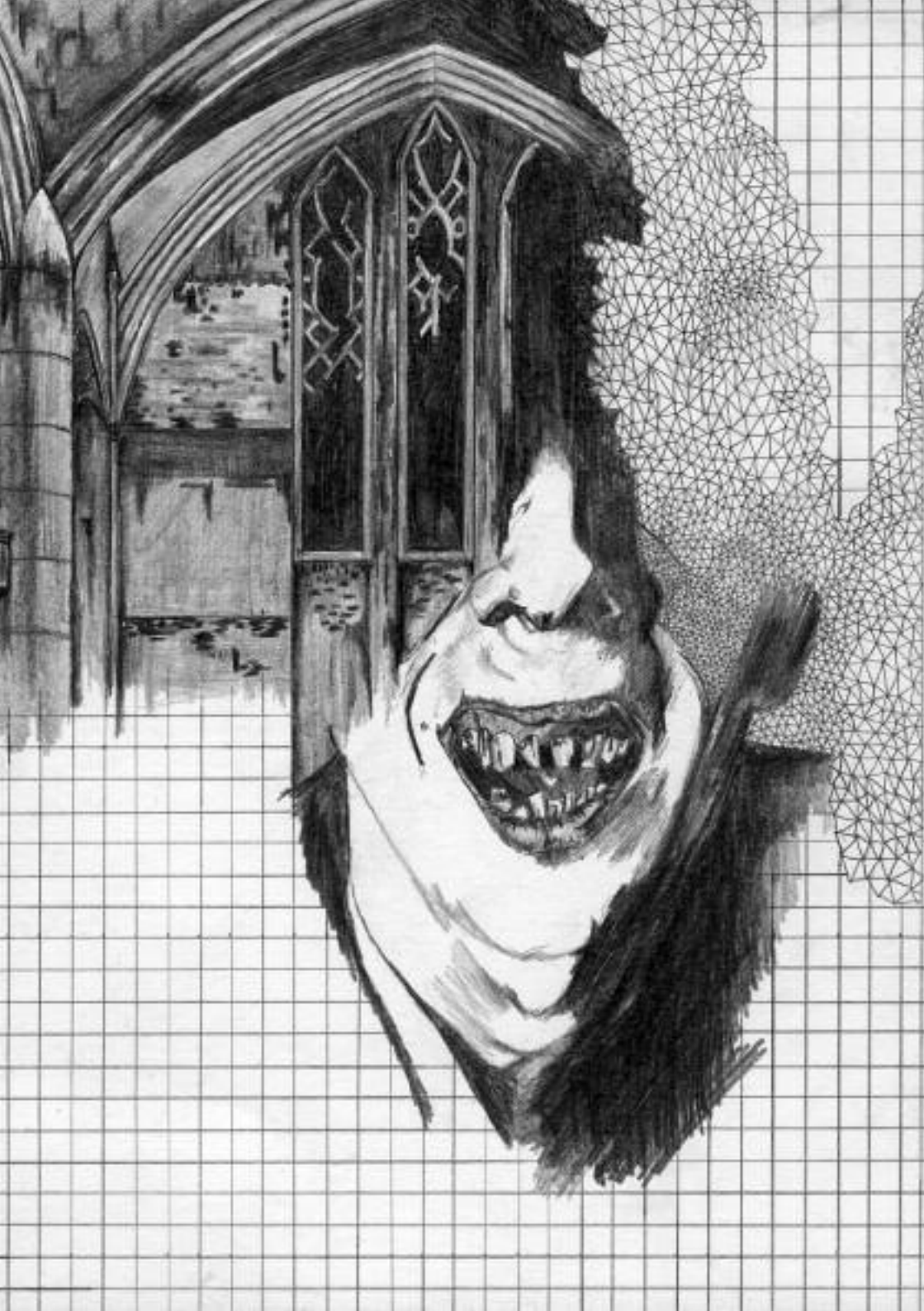
Yet, out of darkness comes the light.
The long considerate silence when all stare quietly into the abyss is broken with a joke and the evacuation to get another round. Everything is accepted, the tension dissipates and all move on.

Empty glasses fill the tables. The spin increases. Eyes roll, but the love is there. Lips moisten. Statements are made. Secret desires and fears are revealed and many, for the first time, express what they really feel.

All this broken only with shambles to the alien white of the toilet, blinking eyes and stark unreality, before heading quickly back to the warmth of the collective. Back to honesty and acceptance, untold generosity and togetherness with former strangers.

It all rolls on and on, ever tighter, till all consciousness is lost and freedom turns to confusion. Spilling out into the cold, beautiful air of the street and then home.

Tomorrow, after headache, all forgotten of course, except for a deeper bond felt by all, but that goes, as ever, unsaid.



ST. JUDES

O! Jude's il see yis right
The worshippers of Christ has long since gone
Was a carpet warehouse for a time
Rolls a Axminster replaced the divine
But now it's arrs
An in it
Lies thee debris
Of tha city

God will provide dey say
He did for us
A roof over ar eads
A central location
Authentic stained glass an original fitments
Dis is ar exclusive club

Ah yis, patrons travel from miles around for
a night at Jude's
There'd be queues around tha block
If it wasn't for ar VIP entrance
Through a corrugated iron door to thee vestry

Mac will be on the organ, for as long as he
can stand
And Gummy Sean will be singin along
There maybe no bar
But Holy Water'll be available from the Font
Curtsey a tha hole in tha roof
That lets out ar sins
An in
Acid rain straight from tha Lord

Entrance is free
But yer name must be on the list
For this is indeed an exclusive club
An only those denied entrance elsewhere
Can enter ar hallowed alls
For, despite what ye may think
We are all scum in de eyes of tha Lord

In Jude's, God stares down on us through
the chicken wire
An the little colour tha's allowed in through
the top a tha boards
Lightin thee ald arches and pillars
An the needles an space heaters an rat shit
For dey are all God's creations
No more divine than you or I
An it's amongst this that we seek sancturee
As outside, the city, she transforms

The boards we tread on remain pious and strong
Despite the decadence, thee hold firm
Despite the city outside
What'as become
As us, almost part of tha pavements
Are moved on

But we're havin ar own party now
All night long
Cos there's nothin else in this town for us
Nothing else in this world for us

We swing and swig and fall an fight
Across tha pews we lie all night
As paint flakes from ceilings and saints
We disappear inta each other
An we are like anyone in any club
Till again comes tha light
She
And the cold



I'VE ALWAYS BEEN HERE

I've always been here, watching the Sergeant Majors
and the slave traders walking briskly into town,
building this place from a village to a city.

I've always been here, watching them come from
four continents, carrying the trade of the world on their
backs and struggling to keep their cultures alive.

I've always been here, watching a cathedral slowly rise,
a monument to a God seemingly indifferent to those
surrounding his house.

I've always been here, watching people run for cover as
bombs fall all around, the fear clear in sheltering eyes.

I've always been here, watching the poets and the painters
running home to their flats, their arms intertwined, drunk on
the possibilities of the future.

I've always been here, watching the city slowly fall,
the unemployed returning home, overwhelmed by despair.

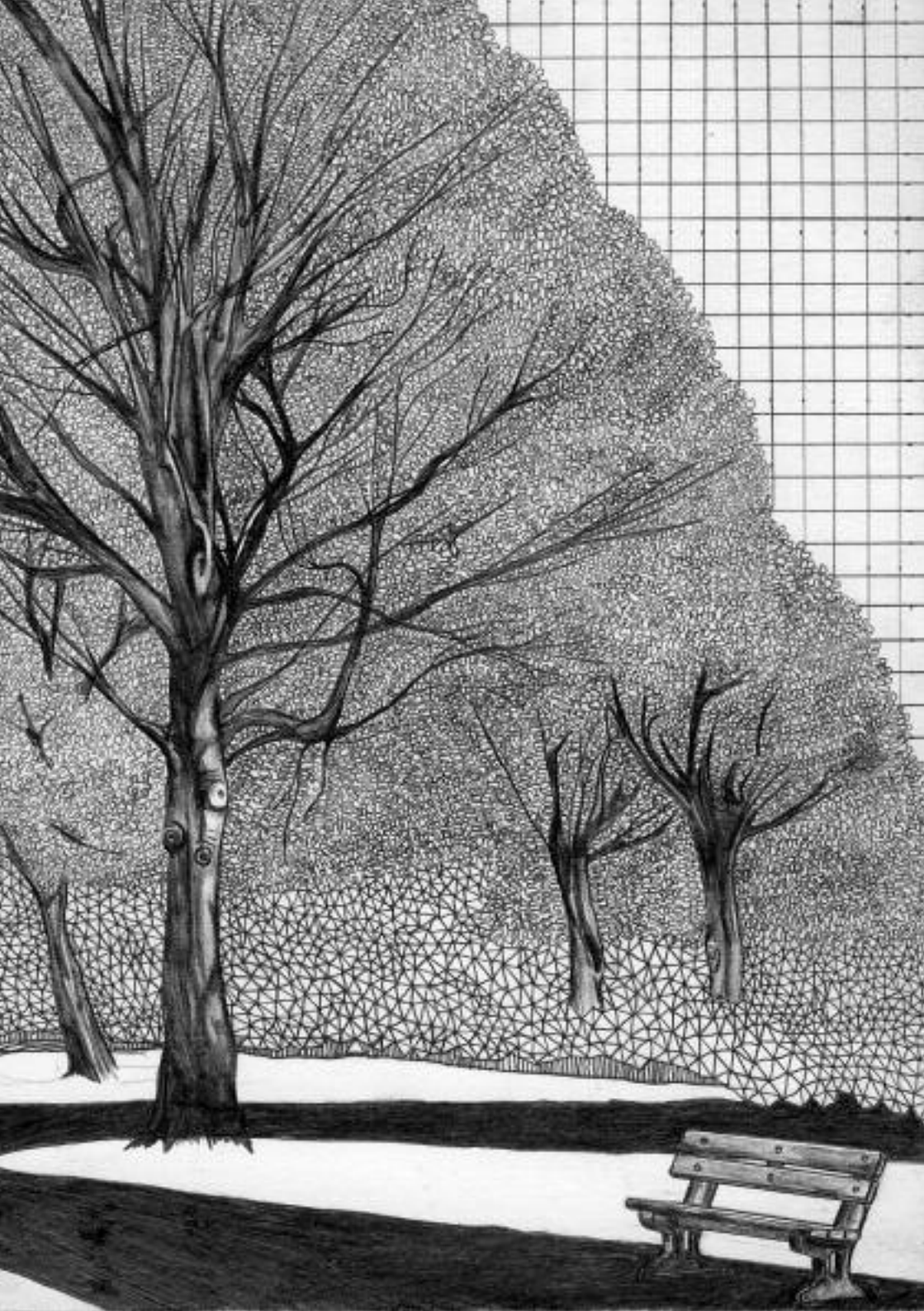
I've always been here, watching everything burn
and police flee from bricks thrown by those with
revenge in their eyes.

I've always been here, watching the boards go up and the
population pick through the ashes of their community.

I've always been here, watching the people return,
the builders come, the palaces be repaired.

I've always been here, watching steel and glass towers rise
on the horizon and new suits coming home from work.

I've always been here, watching it all fall again, and the
flames twice as strong, as they ever were before.



FALKNER SQUARE

Jean-Dominique sat breathless on the bench and admired the Square with his tired, over-stimulated eyes. The sun pitched down, low in heat but deeply golden. Lustrous green leaves moved slowly in the breeze that came straight up from the river. A big, shirtless guy lay sunbathing next to an old silver ghetto blaster pumping out Reggae while a young couple sat on a far bench. They held hands but looked down at the tarmac pathway rather than each other.

What a place, thought Jean-Dominique. He could imagine Lennon sitting here all those years ago, just like he was, inspired by it all. He couldn't believe he was finally here, the place where the Beatles came from. He'd already been down to Mathew Street, The Beatles Museum down the docks, and on the Magical Mystery Tour bus out to Penny Lane and Strawberry Field.

The rest of the city impressed him too though: the Liver Buildings, the cathedral just down the road in dark red stone, bright and dusty in the sunshine, even the hostel here on the square. He'd been in hostels all over the world, but this one was really up there. Just down the road from the art school John had attended. Jean-Dominique imagined him coming to Falkner Square in-between his lectures.

"I did come here," said the ghost of John. "I used to come here with my girlfriend for a romantic walk, have a drink in the pubs. I even sat on this very bench with her."

"This very bench?" said Jean-Dominique, ecstatic, his eyes bright with wonder at the sudden presence.

"Aye, you're an easily pleased lad aren't you?" said John dryly. "Yeah, I sat on this very bench here, just like I've sat on a thousand million other bloody benches. Doesn't mean you're going to go home and write 'Working Class Hero' does it though?"

"Well, no, I never meant..." Jean-Dominique was stung by the piss-taking from the ghost of his idol, but carried on with his questions, sensing that this would be his only chance to find out the things that he had always wanted to know. He carried on: "Is that the favorite song of yours that you've written then?"

"Well. I dunno. I like most of them. It's misunderstood that one like. It's better than 'Imagine' though, the one they all go mad for. That said, if ye all like the sentiment of that one, there's some hope in the world, eh?" He raised a half-smile, his deep eyes unmoving. There was a moment of silence, then he continued: "Thing is though, I am from this town, I went to that art school and I drank in those bars. But what us lads did when we were together, it was about much more than what house I was fuckin born in. It was about us, and it was also about everything that we ended up seeing across the world, ye know? You can come here or go to Strawberry Field or whatever, but your Strawberry Field is in your head, mate, just like mine is in mine. What makes it great, why yer so happy about visiting is because of what the song meant to you long before you even landed in this godforsaken town. You coming here, looking at this square, it's just reflection of yourself, a pilgrimage to what those songs meant to you, when you first heard them."

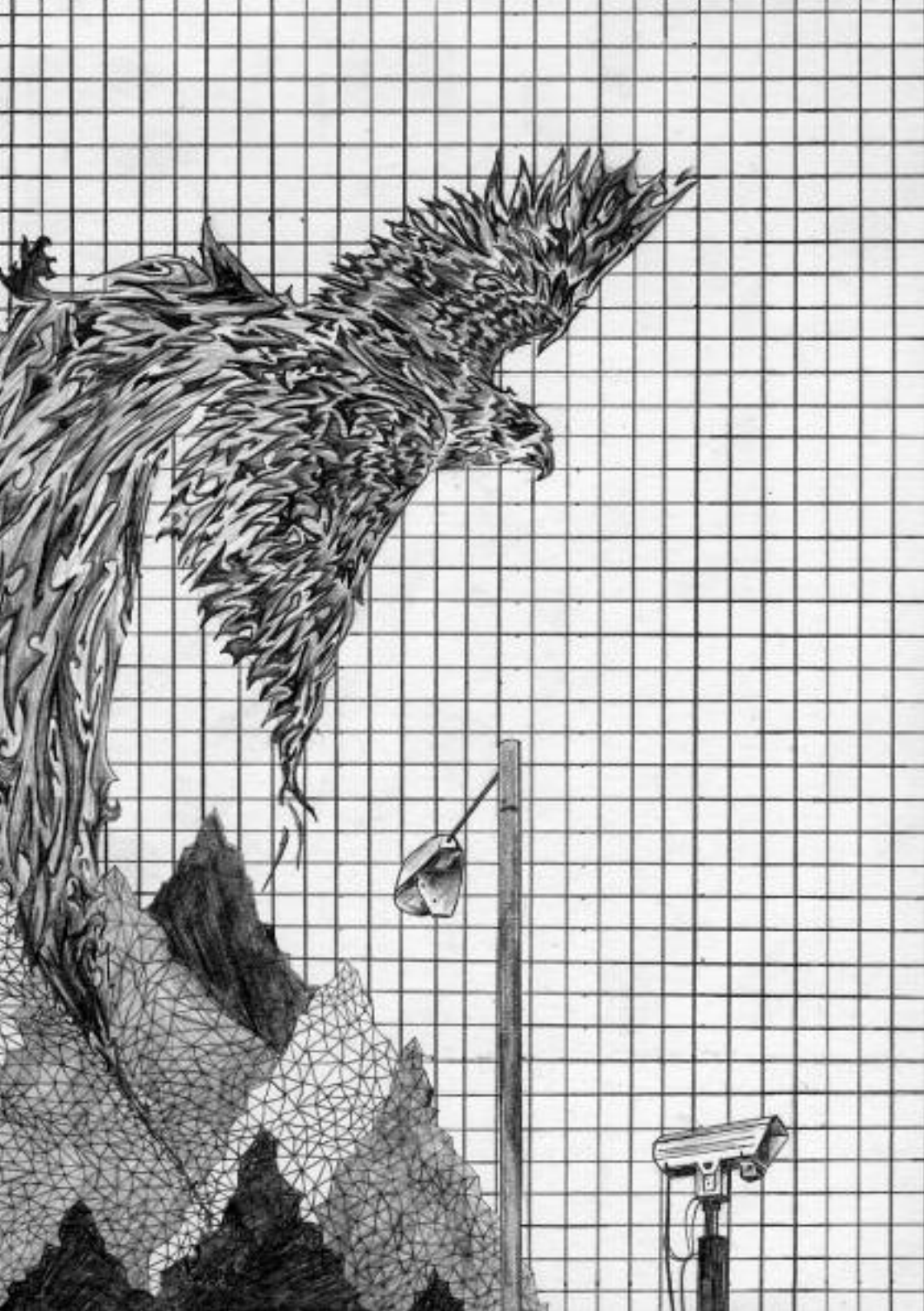
There was another pause then Jean-Dominique stuttered on: "Why, why have you appeared to me here?"

"Oh, no reason, I'm just another ghost passing through. You're not the only one who has made a pilgrimage. This place has resonance for me too, even though it's changing. Flats getting put in the art school – what'll they fucking do next ay? Anyway, must go. I'm off to go and frighten some tourists on the Duck Tours boat."

"Just one more question," said Jean-Dominique urgently, and he gestured with his hands for John not to go, "why do you look so young?"

"Cos I'm here in Falkner Square. All visions of ourselves and others are illusions. I was here when I was young and you would expect me to have looked like this when I was around here. Anyway, that's yer lot," he said in his soft scouse. His eyes flashed and then he gave a toothy smile before disappearing.

Dazed, Jean-Dominique leaned forward and blinked. He felt the heat of the sun on the back of his neck where it had moved directly above him. In the corner of the Square he saw a mangy dog squatting for a shit while his keeper, a skinhead in a baggy blue tracky, looked on with indifference.



AS EVER THE PHOENIX

His mind felt like it was cracking open, his eyes were puffy and red, and his skin itchy and sticky. He lay cocooned in his cheap, battered leather jacket and a t-shirt stuck to him by three days worth of sweat.

He held his head in his hands, keeping his burning, swollen eyes closed for as long as possible, only looking up occasionally to see the couple of Arab ladies opposite chatting through all his suffering. The sound of the many washing machines turning was reassuring, though barely enough to drown out the brooding thoughts that threatened to career into his mind.

The laundrette had a stifling atmosphere. Strip lights on even in the day, walls plastered with brightly-coloured flyers advertising long-past events and every surface covered with a thin, sickly-static residue of detergent.

He felt like he was breathing it in, the powder going deep, searing away at his already cigarette-abused lungs, slowly suffocating him as he sat beneath the grim yellow fluorescence. He put his head back in his hands again for a long time. Squeezing his eyes hard to try and take control of the throbbing, trying to take control of the feeling in his body.

When he looked up again the two ladies had gone and he found himself looking straight out through the large front window of the shop that looked across the junction of Upper Parliament Street, Catharine Street and Princes Avenue.

Cars, vans, buses, bikes and people all moved rapidly in all directions through the crossroads, all speeding along their own paths through the city. He felt a little better now, and continued to stare out at the never-ending flow through the window that was scarred around the edges with the dust and grease of a million washes.

He stared unblinking until his eyes started to stream and the Escorts and Polos and Hyundais and Transits began to blur. Blue and chrome became brown and plastic, the back of one car began to connect with the front of another.

As he watched, the pedestrians began to walk slower, their every action becoming long and fluid. Every single movement of every body could be seen in minute detail, dragged out and fractured. Eventually, their whole forms began to fragment and disintegrate.

The cars became viscous, their components stretching and flexing before losing their forms and turning into fluid shapes. These too began to flux and bend, breaking into pieces and floating off in many directions.

He saw a bird rise out of the now cracking tarmac on Princes Avenue, a Phoenix that struggled hard to free itself from the fragmenting road surface, eventually, violently, pushing its body outwards and turning the remaining tarmac to dust. It stretched out its brilliant red and gold wings as it rose away.

As he looked back to the road, he saw it had turned into a foaming torrent of a river, roaring forwards without pause down where the avenue had been. In it floated the last few forms of vehicles that quickly sank.

The Georgian terraces that lined the road began to crumble, their facades falling in on themselves to reveal thick jungle, soaring golden temples and, in the distance, jagged, snow-tipped mountain ranges. The remaining people on the streets turned there, in the bright sunshine, into lions and stags and dragons and mermaids.

And, as the last vestiges of Liverpool 8 erupted, he saw the drive-in NatWest consumed by a waterfall and, far across the plains, the Renshaws factory was shunted aside by an emerging volcano.

Here were a million colours and forms rising before his eyes. Animals grazed on the rich plains and leaped through the surging waters now deep blue, then viscous green, now crystal clear.

It all became too much and, his eyes aflame, he closed them, squeezing them tighter than ever, but still he saw the colours on the inside of his closed lids, burning into his mind.

He concentrated all of his thoughts, all of his energy, on containing what he had seen: the sounds of the volcano; the continually rumbling drums from far away; the vivid, liquid brown of the stag's eye; the flock of small, bright birds emerging from the dense, damp undergrowth. All surged inside his head for what seemed like an age.

When he eventually peeled open his dry, sticky eyelids again, he was confronted with only the dirty window of the launderette and a shrunken old woman gently snoring on the bench opposite.

Through the window, a Hackney Carriage honked and careered down Princes Road; but behind it, in the corner of his vision, he could see a Phoenix still rising.

CANNING

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