

*"The Hill has always been there, of course.
Rising above the surrounding everydayness,
it raises its head and speaks to the other
hills around it."*

MOUNT LONDON

ASCENTS in the VERTICAL CITY

Penned in the Margins

edited by TOM CHIVERS & MARTIN KRATZ

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BATTERSEA POWER STATION

Bradley L. Garrett

The snaking shuffle of the train from Platform 12 at Clapham Junction to Victoria always seems more of a meander than other rail connections. The rhythmic, side-to-side bounce lulls passengers into stillness, suspended a single story over the bustle of south London chippies and chicken joints. Pausing briefly at Battersea Park Station, pressing one's head against the breathy window condensation with eye-cupped hands provides a rare backglimpse. A slow turn bends the carriages to reveal the moving body from inside its centripetal shell. There, hundreds of strangers swipe at screens and skim sections of free newspapers: routine distractions.

Crossing the carriage in a surfing shamble as the train regains its speed toward Victoria, our final destination, the view from the window on the right hand side is engulfed by a fifty thousand cubic metre, powder-blue gasometer. Inevitably, when the gasholder moves aside, as if being wheeled off set, the hulking expanse of Battersea Power Station (A Side) slides into frame with sleek force. Many of the daily papers are then subtly laid on laps and devices coyly raised to capture. A multitude of eyes flit across millions of bricks, hundreds of blown-out windows and four creamy smokestacks, impossibly small gulls drifting amongst it all, squawking information to each other about air currents and vulnerable river creatures ripe for plucking with a swift nosedive from the derelict industrial cranes perched over the south bank of the Thames. The historical imagination thus springs into life — a movement through time with a suggestive

vertical stretch, from chimney rim to tidal rip. And deeper. Steam and smoke and energy didn't just get pumped into the 20th century industrial airborne quagmire through those slick stacks; it was also driven into dripping and calcifying tunnels, under the Thames, to the north bank, heating council flats in Pimlico.

Focusing on the windows or bricks of the building, or even its infrastructural nether-regions, opens up all sorts of imaginative spaces, but it's really the chimneys I've always been in love with, jutting as they do into the slow clouds at their own indolent pace, oblivious but somehow smug. Overwhelmed by a desire to touch them, a friend and I wiggled through a broken wooden slat under the raised railway on 5th November and ran across the property in a euphoric panic well-suited to Bonfire Night. After squeezing under some loose fencing, climbing the decaying girders buttressing the brick and up onto the scaffolding hedging the base of the stacks, we finally made it a quarter of the way up the northwest chimney of A Side. Perched on janky scaffold planks, I turned the lid on a bottle of whiskey past the safety clicks. I drank deeply as the explosions began in Battersea Park and reclined against the taupe-toned concrete, caressing its texture while tiny fragments crumbled inside, dislodged by bursts of colour, the din of human screams in the park below accentuating our vertical isolation. My sense of fulfilment was far more intoxicating than the whiskey or rockets.

Back on the rails again days later, I'm even more attentive whilst riding the gleaming tracks that converge on Victoria, skirting the borders of the power station, as if the building has leprosy, a rotting London limb every developer is sure will crumble any day now. Yet it's not hard to imagine the chimneys vivaciously smoking, after

touching them while they were rhythmically crumbling on Bonfire Night. Pasted to the window as we rapidly approach the swirling river again, sharing the transient trance with like-minded passengers enraptured by the decaying husk, I try to unfocus my eyes using a technique developed glaring at those dot drawings from the 1990s one could coax mammal shapes from, sold at immobile wheeled wagons in the middle of shopping malls. That cross-eyed sensation reminds me of a late-night retina flicker MDMA comedown and my heart races. Vision thus blurred, I can almost get the chimneys chugging again as my jowls slacken in the effort to visually pull back, blood pumping in my ears.

Bringing the power station back into focus, I imagine pushing on the side of it and watching the roots of the building springing and ripping out of the ground, buried pipes and cables snapping and spurting, upturning million-year-old rocks covered in shit-stinking silt, Roman skulls rolling into the Thames with coins in their eyes, plunging into the wrong waterway two thousand years late. The station, rolled over entirely now, standing on its four skinny legs (which I'm sure could work), is finally ready to walk away from its island of excommunication, wobbling west to Surbiton or Moseley to resettle into a less pressured riverfront space.

However, it's not just the 'land' developers want; it's the possibility of getting sewn into all that connective urban tissue. If you were to take a large, hot knife and slide it through London, insert thumbs and slowly peel it apart into two halves, it would become clear the city exceeds its horizontal expanse in profile. Below us, hidden rivers and sewers, cable conduits, road and utility tunnels, trains tubes, deep shelters and government citadels are hemmed in by disused, dysfunctional and forgotten features, Victorian vaults

of ingenuity and ambition. Underneath this snarl thousand-tonne tunnel-boring machines with names like 'Phyllis' and 'Sophia', Brunel's mutant offspring, are ripping through bedrock at a forty-metre depth, inches at a time, a cyborg earthworm ingesting ancient urban underbelly, shitting it out in piles to be dumped on Wallasea Island in Essex where birds will nest in pulverised Palaeozoic London fossils, spied on by birders from London who have travelled to Essex to see 'nature'. Because of all this frantic digging, every once in a while, laser sensors placed strategically around London set off alarms because an induced tectonic slippage slumped part of the architectural horizon.

From street level up, the London skyline is equally vast, a traversable range of peaks and plateaus. From windy, often wet, heights, you experience the age-old sensation of always thinking the next peak will be slightly higher, provide a slightly better vantage point, as we race against the architectural subsidence and formation of new points of the horizon — like the aptly named Pinnacle building. Thus the quest begins: the negotiation for spatial access, wiggling up drainpipes, throwing climbing slings tied to tennis balls over fire escapes just out of reach, borrowing cleaning staff keys from carts parked in quiet hotel corridors, chatting up concierges and climbing cold construction site scaffolding toward clouds reflecting the twinkle of the metropolis. Each ascent provides a satisfaction that lasts just long enough to sharply inhale the eye-watering London miasma, shaving a few days off your life and a few percentage points off your lung capacity, before eyeing up another prime suspect for top view and starting all over again. When, on rare occasions, a particular summit satisfies the yearning for more than a few days, the pull to return becomes irresistible and a love affair with

a building begins to occlude everything else, resigning everyday life to the margins of interest. My affair with Battersea, thus situated, is lusty and hot after our last tryst and I want more.

A few weeks after that first ascent, I received a text message from a friend with a photo of the same chimney we had climbed from the opposite one, on the southwest corner of A Side. In it, an imperceptible figure in black was hanging from the side of the stack, suspended by an invisible rope, far above the top of the scaffolding from which I had watched the fireworks. The photo induced feral impulses in me and the next time I slinked by on the train, I began to weep. A man next to me, in a cheap Marks and Spencer suit, with dead, dark, weight under his eyes and an egg sandwich and crisps in a rumpled Tesco carrier bag at his feet, looked toward me and we briefly made eye contact. His initial shock and embarrassment slowly turned into a downward smile and squint of admiration stained with sadness, an acknowledgment that he too was overwhelmed. As we turned back to the windows, I saw him involuntarily shiver in my peripheral vision before I began doing my MDMA eye trick on the architecture again.

The next time we ran across the derelict perimeter into the power station, through the no-man's land of Japanese knotweed, ancient industrial rubble, hard-packed repatriated soil and now, hulking construction equipment ripping up the yard, our comparatively tiny frames were saddled with climbing equipment. We negotiated some noisy temporary fencing, and made it to the base of the building. My friend scaled the decaying internal girders and dropped down a hauling rope. I attached fifty kilos of kit. I was sure security was sitting somewhere, listening to the all-too-human

tugging sounds, deploying an intruder 'action plan'. But they never arrived, so I followed the bags up. Past the rooftop, at the top of the scaffolding again, with one gloved hand on the cold concrete of the stack, connected to an infinitesimal white rope dangling in the frigid wind by a couple of metal ascenders and a harness, I stuck my foot in a loop and lifted off. Metre by metre, crunching, pushing, pulling, standing, grunting, resting and repeating, I made it to the top and pulled myself up to stand on the lip of the chimney.

There, I looked down at a temporary white tent in the middle of the power station, placed there by an ambitious developer who may have an analogous affinity for the place, and considered the inevitable dismemberment of this pained little piece of land I've come to love so much. The chimney that will replace the one I'm standing on, a simulacrum of its former self, with a one hundred and ten-metre public viewing platform, will be stripped of certain essences. For instance: the pink pig that detached itself from the stacks, floating into the Heathrow flight path in 1967, will never have been attached to those replacement casts. Nor will we. Nor will they crumble in the same tantalising way every Bonfire Night.

An acquired British sociality for embarrassment of nostalgia pulls me from my reverie and I climb down, putting my weight on the rope again. I'm back in my body, with an unbearable tension in my arms as I dangle just under the pinnacle of the stack, somehow unable to let go and push the handle on my descender to get back to the scaffold planking. I'm locked in a permanent gripping muscle suspension that, whilst perhaps relaying an air of stasis to a downlooker (what would this situation look like from a low-flying plane?), is actually surging through me in powerful waves. Hovering in the cold, strung up by pieces of metal pressed from

a machine in Taiwan that passed through the hands of people I'll never meet, attached to an anchor sunk by a power station worker from my grandparents' generation who clearly had faith in the metal, the concrete, to hold their weight, threaded into fabric easily sliced with a sharp blade, staring over a sea of lights and a rush of muddy water that looks blue, painted by those lights, the soft sound of the train, my train, slithering and shaking its way around the perimeter of the island, involuntarily discharging metal-on-metal showers of midnight sparks and high-pitched shrieks, I let my hands slip off the rope. The fleeting arthritis of cold and fear that gripped me slinks through, down the ridges of the chimney and into the ground, though the tunnels, into the water table. I'm limp, suspended, satiated.