

THE ROTHERHITHE CARYATIDS



A caryatid (/kæri'ætɪd/; Greek: Καρυάτις, plural: Καρυάτιδες) is a sculpted female figure serving as an architectural support taking the place of a column or a pillar supporting an entablature on her head. The Greek term karyatides literally means “maidens of Karyai”, an ancient town of Peloponnese. Karyai had a famous temple dedicated to the goddess **Artemis** in her aspect of Artemis Karyatis: “As Karyatis she rejoiced in the dances of the nut-tree village of Karyai, those Karyatides, who in their **ecstatic round-dance** carried on their heads baskets of live reeds, as if they were dancing plants” (Kerenyi 1980 p 149).

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Paradise gate, Southwark Park.

You walk through avenues of oak and cypress, gems of light swarming like heat strokeobelisks, circles – paths veering into sepulchral groves. Twin caryatids casting pale light. You remember them from the Heygate Estate, that sunken garden on Deacon Way. Their presence here is disorientating, it shocks you, a sharp point of return. The thought of them had surged prismatically when you heard the estate was being demolished, you imagined them stolen by antique dealers, left in a shed somewhere, dusty and broken. Now, after years in exile they are here again. You are stunned by their serenity, their totemic strangeness; you realise this encounter signifies the unspooling and repositioning of time. They emerged bearing wreaths of laurel and oak at Rotherhithe Town Hall in 1897 flanking the entrance with mournful ceremony. In 1974 they were moved to the Elephant and Castle where the first

plattentbau blocks were forming in the rubble of slum clearances and bomb damage. The statues, in their solemnity, took possession of a hidden garden, a crypt like zone of roses, maples and walnut trees.

You edge the boundary of Abbeyfield estate, gardens leaching out on to parched avenues of Southwark park – a lost church – *Rotherhithe the Epiphany* – concrete shell silently transmitting Scotland, austerity, endurance — you are repelled by the exhalation of damp – the powdery blooms of mildew. You remember those houses in ruins – Aspinden Street, Dilston Grove – doors opening onto cascades of masonry; orange curtains, a pale blue sitting room. You look for traces amidst the point blocks and maisonettes, sift through the dust for the handfuls of pebbles flecked with blue emulsion that you know are there. Thaxted Court, Damory house, a network of a exuberant gardens, a profusion of roses, damask pink, the sherbert scent of floribunda – The day’s heat is stored in the concrete, the interwoven paths, walls keeling beneath arcs of jasmine. You feel the potential teeming in every surface – of course you think of him, in these moments he is near.

Rotherhithe New Road. A narrow path between a closed 60s precinct and a span of railway arches. You remember it from 2001, coming down to confront the NF, fragments coming back – police cordons, walking from the Elephant, blokes forming up in the Ancient Forresters. The path lets you brush the skin of the railway arches, the bricked up shells of doorways, the oil slick iridescence of steel panels. You emerge in a CGI vista of cruel angles, brick avenues of 12 storey flats. You’re not sure whether they’re inhabited or not. These empty landscaped zones cause a loss of bearings. You think of the Silwood Estate, those flats stranded like a bomb blast for years.

Hollow rooms, exposed walls, regimented squares of peach, coral, duck egg blue. You remember how the black text erupted like ground elder, bindweed, the swarming colonisation of forsaken land – *Tox, Fanta, Zombi-*

Silwood street. Azure sky, bleached pavements, rippling mediterranean heat. You feel the tension, the quiet conflict on this new estate. The will to impose order always a struggle with the damp, the shifting tides, the ceaseless overturning of populations. You come to a desolate vista of pale meadow grass and ferroconcrete, acres of shingle surrounding the power station. Walk under the railway bridge, vistas of rubble replicating in chalky arches like a collapsing empire.

The path is bone dry, engulfed at either side by banks of coiling briars. You walk through the muscat scent of elderflower, potent boughs reaching over you. This is the interstices, border between Lewisham and Southwark; jurisdictional disputes leave neglected parcels of ground. You understand them as zones of wilderness, moments of rupture in the expanse of accelerated development. You step through drifts of ash, heaps of aggregate, a million twitching movements – convolvulus, knapweed, hogweed –

Beyond the wire fence the Millwall ground reminding you of that trigger – April 2001, shock heat of spring; you were on the platform of a stranded station, think now it must have been South Bermondsey. You saw a load of lads you knew from the North Peckham estate, said they'd squatted a row of shops in New Cross and asked you to go with them. You all jumped the train to Queens Road, crushed up together in the doorway, cans of cider, adrenaline surging from the violence in Bermondsey. You walked past dilapidated houses, blackened paintwork cracked like parched riverbeds. You remember the motel and

the Montague Arms and the headache stink of traffic. The place was an old kitchen appliance shop opposite the Goldsmiths Tavern; they were harbouring stuff for the big Mayday demo — military flares, tyres, plastic sheeting. You disappeared through a door concealed beneath a dense strata of club flyers and squeezed into a room stinking of cordite. There were grilles at the windows and blackout curtains, you had to stand still a moment to let your eyes adjust. You climbed through a jagged aperture into the adjoining house and groped towards a stark rectangle of light. There was a back yard, an amethyst jungle of lilac and cherry; settees and office furniture, strings of light webbing the branches. You remember having to listen hard to the accents, Darndale, that estate with horses on edge of Dublin. That day was the cataclysm, triggering a sequence that would break the seal on your life in the Heygate, forcing the door you could push through.

You carry on past the New Den, Surrey Canal Road – the spectral conduit is there in the straightness, the embanked verges. The recalling of it makes sense of the dilapidated warehouses, the yard with caravans and portakabins. You're sure you've been here before, splinters of memory resilient in the derelict hoardings, the rigid layers of posters. You pass beneath a railway bridge – brick spandrels punctured by the grasping pleas of property developers – *big fees paid for intros to landowners – social clubs, religious sites, scaffolds yards* – A crossroads, banks of parched grass and a stone marker. You recognise the herma and think of him again, the mediator, escorting souls across the threshold –

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Ilderton Road.

A millennial estate – Varcoe Road, Verney road – ochre terraces, pitched roofs, an evocation of middle England swathed in George Crosses. Walls are cracking down the middle, sections completely out of alignment.

An incongruous Victorian pub, the Bramcote, opening up time before the Blitz, before the slum clearances. You touch the plywood boards, the fractured blue paint and remember the pavements crushing blue and white with Millwall skins, the nihilistic roar – *we hate humans – no one likes us we don't care* – that was the night the truck was set on fire, fruit machines smashed off the wall – you remember the plaster curlicues, the chipped cornices glowing with eroticism, and you think of his face, his hands on your waist –

The estate sprawls on, territory demarcated with beer garden furniture – drop down to a yard behind Selco, that massive builders merchants. Stop to talk to someone you haven't seen since you lived down here, one of your old neighbours on the Heygate. She's smoking in a doorway having a break from the refunds counter. The car park is encircled by black hoardings and a speckled tide of cigarette ends. Colombian flags, Ecuadorian snack stands, blokes sitting on kerbs in the sweltering heat.

You remember the buzzing anticipation, working through your shift on a hot day; standing in front of the mirror on every break, orange lipstick, black mascara, more and more until you walked out in a haze of perfume. She says you should come out later, Windsor first then Afrikiko, that club that used to be the Canterbury Arms. You remember how they boarded it up on match days, open as usual scrawled on the wooden hoardings and lines of riot police outside.

Massive new housing development on Rotherhithe New Road, that point where the Surrey Canal intersected the Old Kent Road. Telford Homes re-branding the zone *Bermondsey Works*. Feel the yearning undertow of the spectral canal.

Currys – PC World. Stop in McDonalds for a coke, sparkling cold in the car park with blokes from the construction site, luminous vests and the stink of blueberry kush — walk past the new Asda, the African churches encased in office blocks and industrial units. Burgess park, the dusky edge of it – thickets of crab apple, walnut and sycamore. You get flashes of that party on Ossory Road – *Reclaim the Future* – a dark warehouse, cold breath of mildew in the loading bay where the crew sat taking the money. You remember conjoined yards then cerise light and the tropical heat of a vast room. You climbed metal stairs to an elevated platform – must have been the overseers office, and looked out across a vast hangar, hundreds coming in wrecked on k. It was too much, you wanted to get out, broke through the nesting shells of the building and walked down the Old Kent Road.

You follow paths, subtle veins tracing the burrows of Burgess Park and come to the ornamental lake – huge circles drinking together, barbeques and merengue music. The Aylesbury is suddenly there, brutalist slabs radiant in the heat.

You walk through a plantation of silver birches, lad running through the maze of tracks like a rabbit, bags of *white and brown, seeds in his hands* –

The topography has altered since you left, new hills and woods have emerged. In 2002 it was a flat expanse of coarse grass, you could find the relics of the old Surrey canal and the ghost streets that branched from it.

Albany road, boundary of the Aylesbury estate – trusses of roses, clematis clinging to satellite dishes –

This is the occupied zone – razor wire and security guards; new fences constructed to enclose the estate, purple gloss reminding you of the 70s, permeations of psychedelia, the seeping militancy of counterculture.

You find traces of graff from the protests, *down with the fences* and the ghostly strains of confrontations with police –

You pull yourself up into the twisting branches of a lilac, squeeze through a gap in a metal gate and drop down into a space between two walls. A narrow track unfolds between plywood panels and steel mesh. You press metal grids with your palms until you find one that unhooks, wrenches out of joint and prises off. You slink through, reminded then that walls have perforations, not always visible, fleeting moments when the threshold is gauzy.

At that point of crossing there is peace.

Inside the zone it is paradisiac; the heat is intense, the birdsong exuberant, roses blooming for *no one but themselves*. You have tapped into an ecstatic seam, a rush of euphoria like LSD stored in your spine unlocked after two decades – the estate is suffused with chlorophyll light, colour saturated like a 70s photograph. You follow paths through stately conifers, squares of sitexed maisonettes –

a figure emerges from a concrete staircase, IFSEC logo – Brixton accent, asks if you're visiting someone —

visiting someone — you are stunned that people are still here – must only be a scattering in this abandoned zone where zinc covers windows and lines of displacement stretch out to Thamesmead, Woolwich, Bexley –

he turns unconcerned back to his van –

a *visitation* — they are still here – in these melancholy gardens, saplings they planted break walls and fences, patio palms become giants –

You walk through a span of shimmering gardens, sweet canopies of elderflower, quatrefoil petals dusting your hair. You find tiled vestibules, frozen lifts, a network of aerial walkways riven by thistle, red campion, unexpected bursts of ornamental lilies –

you remember the paths you navigated, different routes every day, to the Heygate, the Aylesbury's twin. You look now across a private citadel, Elephant Park. It means nothing to you, a glossy shield around it, the unfurling of ironic platitudes – *an established neighbourhood where everyone loves to belong* –

The Heygate, a place indelibly etched. You knew how it all connected, prized your knowledge of the brutalist blocks, the bridges over breezeblock yards. You remember the olive green paint and the pale outlines of 80s graffiti. And all those nights, fierce moments of bonding in that sullen, airless room. They've obliterated the estate but you can still conjure it, it never goes away.

The sunken garden occupied a different temporality; its emptiness, the strangeness of the statues reminded you of a De Chirico painting. It seemed unreachable as you looked down from your 10th floor window, an enclosed woodland responding to the cyclical time of the seasons. The looming slab blocks sheltered it from the frantic diurnal rhythm of the shopping centre, the market, the Charlie Chaplin pub.

The carved symbolism of the caryatids was lost to you then but feels poignant now in the moment of decoding – oak for resilience, laurel for triumph.

You scan the hoardings depicting an Elephant and Castle you don't recognise – a cleansed zone, an affluent white population. It is sanitised, porosity of the rookery sealed. You wonder if the caryatids might transmit something of the Heygate in their glade in Southwark Park. In their circling worship of Artemis, they signal a return to wilderness.

You look through the perimeter fence at the new development, the 30 storey towers with their *diverse brickwork and asymmetrical balconies*. You want to locate the garden but the coordinates are shifting.

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Rotherhithe Caryatids is a sample extract from a new publication *Walking Cities: London* due to be published in Spring 2016.

Walking Cities: London explores how the temporal realities revealed through urban walking can act as a method for dialogical and empirical mapping.

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PRESS