

LONDINIUM TOUR GUIDE (UNOFFICIAL)

One minute it's hopscotch in bare feet,
next you're four foot up in a sedan in case
your pink stockings get dirty. No one
prepared me for marriage. Me and Alba
were the wild girls of Londinium,
sought to discover the secrets
of its hidden hearts, still too young
to withhold more than we revealed,
to join this merry cast of actors.
She was like a rag doll who'd lost its stuffing:
spiky brown hair kept short 'cos of nits;
everyone said she was either anorexic
or had worms, but Alba was so busy
chasing the dulcis vita that she just burnt
everything she ate before it turned to fat.
She'd drag me out on dangerous escapades,
we were partners in crime, banditos, renegades
she said there was more to life
than playing with friggin' dolls, like causing
trouble and discovering what grown-ups
did in private without getting caught.
We were gonna steal from the rich,

give to the poor, keep seventy-five per cent
for ourselves and live in one of them mansions
with a thousand slaves feeding us cakes,
all day every day, but until such time . . . Her dad
owned the butcher's next door but one.
Mine couldn't care less what I did.

His precious Catullus got the abacus and wax,
I got the sewing kit and tweezers.

He was *even* bought a ponytail for his curly
little head, so's he fitted in at school

with all those trendy Roman kids.
Bless his sockless feet. *Imagine.*

Some days we'd tour the tenements
of Aldersgate. He'd trail behind

like a giant sloth, his big muddy eyes
under sleepy hoods (just like his father's),

and plead with us to slow down;
I'd tell him to *futuo-off, you little runt,*

leaving him behind as we raced towards
the slums, swarming with immigrants,

freed slaves and factory workers (usual suspects).
We'd play Knock-Down-Ginger, throw stones,

break windows, then leg-it down an alley
outa-sight, arrive home breathless

and itching with flea bites and jigger-foot.
What with the alfresco sewerage running

between paving stones, now
in my neighbourhood, summer evenings
were spiced, trout fried on stalls, fresh
out of the Thames, you could eat air
or run home for supper in the back-a-yard
Dad called an atrium. That's
if the rush-hour traffic allowed, carts
clogged up the main drag to the Forum, unloading
produce from up-country or abroad.
Sometimes, I'd hear a solitary flute through an open
window, and stop breathing.
Later we'd sneak out for the vicarious thrill
of the carnal experience. Like two toms,
we'd prowl the darkened alleys, our noses
sniffing out the devastating odour of sex.
Peeping through candle-lit shutters,
we were amazed at the adult need to strip off
and stick things in each other.
Men and women, women and women,
men and men, multiples of all sorts
groaning in pain. Absolutely fascinatío!
And then we encountered death,
Lucan Africanus, the baker of Fenchurch.
I was the daughter he never had, he said
(though his eyes spelt *wife*),
gave us fresh bread dipped in honey.

Our thanks? To raid his store one night,
find his great, black, rigor mortis self
in a cloud of flour, two burnt buns for cheeks,
too much yeast in his bowels, emptied
on the floor. That stopped our missions,
for a while. Some nights we'd go to the river,
sit on the beach, look out towards
the marshy islands of Southwark,
and beyond to the jungle that was Britannia,
teeming with spirits and untamed humans.
We'd try to imagine the world beyond the city,
that country a lifetime away that Mum
called home and Dad called prison;
the city of Roma which everyone
went on about as if it were so bloody mirabilis.
We'd talk about the off-duty soldiers
who loitered in our town, everywhere,
they were everywhere, watching for lumps
on our chests, to see if our hips grew away
from our waists, always picking me out,
plucking at me in the market,
Is our little aubergine ready?
'No, I'm not, you stinking pervs,' I'd growl,
skedaddling hotfoot out of their reach.
Sometimes we'd hear grunting
on the beach and imagine some illicit