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John Wilkinson

Ode: The Enigma of the Hour

for Charles Lambert

Columns stand below lost entablature,
stained on flanks where notices disintegrate
and fray, lose their colour.

Columns stand
for lifted lightness,
scurries leaden clouds cannot represent,
for unexpected starts and bustle.
All the same they stand.

 Their shadow cage densifies
where gardens used to shift, wisteria parts
to show urchins
teasing downtown gods and goddesses.

 Fountains topsy-turvy, draw soil,
sucking hard till capillaries collapse.

 This acid spatter
fills in
 scraped frieze, a blanking plate.
Schedules were finalised by late evening,
posters furled.

Engines turned over shudderingly then choked.

 Check out this empirical concrete
bus-stop,
disinfectant smell, in between bays
unemergent ones doss their protruding heads
on knobbly sacks of their things,
 verticals
are stumps of next day, vapour stumps
 bathed in sodium and diesel fumes,
but tentative creatures stir,

stumbling across the piers, pressing slots.

These clubbers feign
contempt for dawn's mauve prototype,
its long car drawn alongside,
still sardonic when the fire comes calling,
when calls ricochet,
theirs is a long-nurtured loathing of what
now starts to break –

they scratch a line
deep through anti-rust layers,
drag their coin through the flawless paint-job
on today's special,
this day's unincised face,
splotch with acid to exfoliate a grove
lost to memory, way barred by doormen
sporting earpieces in ears sunk in meaty heads,
they set it up,

an active, night-long pediment
scribbled on a plexiglass bus shelter,
set it up –
so ill-bedizened nymphs may turn out after
India, youths straggle from gymnastics,
drop their hash symposium, their routine of
poker, not too long,
and French girls retune guitars.

They slouch into their tunnel of light
ho-humming, play with reels
of super-8, of audio tape.

Theirs was a tour of reels
wrapping spindles, draping pillars,
tightly-wound, loosely-strung.

Now shift yourselves.

Scour graffiti off before the boss stomps in,
everything must be exactly so or
it's the chop.

Morning peels away

night's talkative façade,
stunning illustrations flatten out,
collapsible high walkways lock in place, just.
There are no flags to crack, *The Guardian*
hits the floor tightly wadded,
wind drops further if that's possible,
grey mist involves the aluminium struts –
configuring.

I'm up on the eleventh floor

Broken finials, broken phials

Watching the cruisers

Such a stomach-churning

stink!

Such whistling! Gulls' torment! Horrid ketches
lurching round the salting racks!

Ocean-set Phoenicians! Fire Academy!

Did these put in at

San Francisco or Odessa steps?

Alexandra?

What tourists were bedazzled

by martini-stick palms, monkey-puzzle trees,
sad excuses for palms –

a mezzotint poet cruises after his names,
under a café parasol

the nominating poet swirls Angola coffee,
in Gloucester a poet scowls at the canneries,
down fall the huts,

dreaming bedraggled palms...

I walk along the front,

these send me to the front,

I smooth out orders to proceed,

every song a deathly enticement, every song
desperate to dissolve

identity in God or in music or embraces.

Beasts steam and stale.

Calligraphic tiles.

No, that was under the imposts of Damascus.
Enamel signage rusts and crumbles,
concrete posts
stencilled for meetings, their monochrome
tent vaulting
some call life
flashes weakly where grey bulbs submit
vacant pools across dropsical eyes,
fattening as ghosts on TV in black-&-white,
a harder light appraises
cleaners clattering with buckets,
manhandles
their first shift,
paltry rain is flecking, pitting leats of café fat
mingling with petrol:

O Golden Egg!
24-hour food!

Because there is no other outbound service,
sing where grooved columns calcify,
sing in the arcade words get forced into,
in the pre-formed cupola
make a choice of starters,
stumble to your violent place-setting,
song constrained to follow
seeking any human face. It gets right stuffed.
It almost chokes on fried bread.
Weak coffee pools on formica.

Gilles Deleuze! John Wieners!
Joy Street and Vincennes! You are heard
amidst gulls and pigeons!

False positives, retrenching nerves
lower sky down inch by inch,
all rests on anti-roost spikes,
fades on anti-vandal paint,
there is no outbound service,
temporary shutdown, strictly no public access,

See there is this one outbound service
choking and it jolts forward
 in incessant rain
splashing round the colonnade, sheeting down:
the visible cascade, the force of
brooks which through their channels fret,
configuring
hanks of water, plaits of clarity, but no,
not just the one belching the obvious,
channelling the light:

 Wisteria ropes densify in blossom,
flowers binding them for ever and a day turn
clockwise –
ribboned cries float above the court
disguised, encoded,
night returns and they importune.

 Now misbegotten shades whisper
secret words at a pediment
opening as they inch forward between ropes.

Convolvulus.

Columbine.

Author Info

John Wilkinson is Professor of Practice in the Arts at the University of Chicago. His most recent book of poems is *Down to Earth* (Salt, 2008); in late 2010 Salt will reissue his 1994 title *Flung Clear: Poems in six books*.

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