

A city of the plain

From the top of a bus on the edge of the hills,
you felt you might fly over all the miles
of rhubarb and kale, thin commons, shabby sheep,
to the snowglobe city, its one white tower;
the golden glint of owls.

When the world was older,
long ago and once upon a time,
the city was distant; grew
where the river ran out in a marshy plain,
its mud full of relics and sunken things.

Tideline city left by the ebb
of a sea that never returned,
it grew like black coral or coalesced
from what drained off the hills
or what fell from the cloud that hung over it.

A reef of blackened brick,
all its crusted canyons loud
with starlings, the crooning
of bluntbeaked, headbutting pigeons.

City of lightless arches, handsome streets,
city of suits and sweatshops,
city of glamour and Blackshirts.

City whose river runs sluggish with rinsings,
old and grey, under iron bridges, over churning weirs.

Dark city under the stare of owls.

John Foggin

Changing

Turner had to imagine
a language to capture it:
this bowl of smoke,
presented in the palms
of the hills, as a midwife
offers up the newly born:
Leeds, 1816,
the first industrial city.

In the spa changing rooms
that's all history now.
More scrubbed clean
financial services,
as the wool blend suits
are shed, the shorts,
the washed-out Ts,
the branded trainers go on.
But just before
they pitch muscle against
treadmill, arcing cross-trainers,
three men talk
of last night's football.
In that flat sheen of accent,
I hear tappet, a clack of machinery
in the shuttling interplay,
the quick milled asides
that shed a swarf of consonants.
They shim past me,
an exaggerated stiff-legged,
big-balled strut to workout.

That watercolour city
of loom and scutch,
bobbin and boiler,
still sings loud –

like tectonic plates,
subterranean, dangerous,
making waves.

Greg Lodge

“.....wiseowl Leeds

pro rege et lege schools, nobody needs
your drills and chanting”

[Tony Harrison: ‘The Rhubarbarians’]

According to their cloth

I knew one man made a forced march in a column,
full pack and rifle; heat and scrub, humidity, thick dust;
forty miles in a single day and never knew a battle plan.

One man who fell from a plane
in a night full of parachutes,
the wind white silk ; the dark sound of planes
dwindling up into the night and him falling into fiasco;
who taught history, who clung to Communism
like a Tudor martyr to a relic.

Another who drove his jeep into something
that a man might make, experimenting
in a slovenly way with making up an idea of hell;
into a camp made out of rust and rot,
of wire and sweet black smoke and rags and sweat;
No one came to liberate him;
no one to take his eyes from the dark,
no-one to bring him back from the dead.

The one I loved most spun yarn
for uniforms and army blankets.
Reserved occupation. Conchie.
All the same to him. *Nobody tried to kill me.*
He cut his coat according to his cloth.
Took his suit lengths into Leeds,
to Jewish tailors, emigrés
in small dark shops in narrow streets.

You don't choose where you are in history.

You cut your coat
and wear it.

John Foggin

Sure of the father

The seventieth anniversary of VE Day;
the remembered war goes on and on
becoming less real with each year.
It's not wreath-laying royals, earning
their stipend with rehearsed solemnity,
or, shrunk behind medal ribbons, veterans
having their day, that bring you to mind.
It's *Private Buckaroo* (1942), late night TV:
the Andrews Sisters, aglow with tempera
smiles, razor-sharp WAC uniforms,
pageboy rolls, tug onstage a model tree.
Harry James' trumpet wails, the band swings ,
the girls finger pop, and sing out-
Don't Sit Under The Apple Tree.

Once I bought you *The Very Best Of*.
When the house was cleared it was still
on the bookshelf, cellophaned;
next to gleaming volumes on Dunkirk.
Like the war, you receded into history,
chose not to speak for yourself, but resisted,
gave little up - kept mum. In the space
I can make a simulacrum; a daydreamed man,
who liked American swing,
who drove bren-gun carriers
who hit a cricket ball out of Europe
who guarded other's palaces,
who, for fifty years, quietly
watched an apple fall close and root.

Greg Lodge

What the owls saw

They watched with gilded eyes.

Out from the west, a flick of black sleet, spatterings, squalls,
a fattening cloud, like the ash of a great burning
and it fell on the city.

Sequin glints: sapphire, silver, emerald,
a great winnowing, the sieving and sifting of wings,
the glitter of a million eyes and beaks and claws
battening on every coign and corniced ledge.

The owls watched them seethe
on carved acanthus, crockets, ogees, orioles,
pediments and finials, and architraves,
scrabbling on the bronze Black Prince, fratching and clawing
and stropping beaks, fouling, crusting everything with guano
that squirmed and writhed with teeming things.
Ravenous and quarrelsome the birds.

Night after night. Gone at first light. The owls saw them go
into big skies, over fields and woods: midge clouds,
fractals of iron filings, a distant dance of mobius loops and swirls.
And so it went and the owls stared down the years,
and nothing changed until it did.

That day the mazy dance grew frantic fast, spiralled madly
into itself and clenched to the size of a bee, a knot
impossibly dense, and faster than light, drilled through the crust
of the world and into its turning core,
the shiver of the hot machine. Into its black fire
the starlings went, and that's where they stayed.
Because the phoenix is just a story.
Because what's burned,
stays burned

The golden owls stared out
across a city shining white, a coral reef
of turrets, towers, brilliant splintering light
lensed like the eyes of the fly.
There was nowhere to hide. The owls went blind,
they seethed for the dark. They went mad.
The hands of the clock stuttered.
And stopped for good.

John Foggin

Lindos by night

fishes circle each other in the bay underwater
a blue and orange child's mobile

hawks hang between beach and citadel stasis
choreographed wind chimes on a still day

from the acropolis at dusk the knowing little owl
observes her burnished mirror town

in the tavernas charcoal flares flesh and herb
smoke rises upwards unsung

with gleaming eyes stoned tourists weave through
painted streets unwearying

bar televisions flicker silver reflecting distorted
Greece incandescent on city streets

the owl spreads wings but drops too late
to hunt the town for wisdom

Greg Lodge

What the owls dreamed

*[The crow wish' d everything was black,
the owl that everything was white:]*

The owls went blind;
they stared. Everything was black.
They could see
whatever they wanted.

Time breathed in. One great indrawn breath.

The drained muck of mills and foundries
shrank back up the river's long gut.
Eel and trout and salmon came after.
The river grew bright with air.
In the east, the seas sank,
Drowned ships, sailors, streets and steeples
steamed in the sun.

The city's reef unbuilt
into forest and marsh
thick with flies, and the river
gathered itself, grew wide and turbulent,
its bunched muscles slid
and flexed under its skin;
it raced like surf up the dale,
drowning eyebright and heartsease,
scattering the stones of small towns,
the crumbled footings of farms,
and it hurled itself in a welter
up the white cliffs of Craven,

it foamed on the tessellate stone
in rainbows and mist,
drank itself under
a mile high wall of ice
that shimmered with trapped stars.

The world went silent.

The owls stared and stared. It was white.
There were no kings. No laws.
The owls froze. Their hearts stopped.

John Foggin

Women in the whirlpool

Like terrycloth penguins they waddle poolside.

Six women relaxing on a "girl's night in";
slicked back, DIY facelift ponytails glinting

in the spotlights like oiled, preened feathers.

Wary of predators, scary in the dedication
to fun, they claim a clearing in the forest

of loungers, tables, chairs; form a magic
circle whose incantations are gelish, shellac,
minxes, fake bakes, waxes, tatts and goss.

In the whirlpool bath they sit in a lily pad
scurf of declining bubbles; swaying gently
in the flux, transported, as if front row

at a reunion gig for a band from their lost youth.
They chatter in a miasma of celebrity scents,
the clink of Poundland bling. *Oh! It's hot* says one;

Where's the on button? giggles another, bumping
and grinding piercings, arse-antlers below
the waterline. They channel distressed mill girls

on Wakes Week, colluding about work, or the lack
of it, complaining about men, or the lack of them;
but when the jets spring up with a bright tiger roar,

the mirror surface dissolves and hard faces,
hard luck follow. Water becomes their element,
softens them. Laid back on green tiles, spinster-

pale arms stretched out, hair loosened, wagged
free, they stare up, vaguely, as nymphs in a forest
pool, waiting, enchanted, for their Hylas to arrive.

Greg Lodge