

The Wheel

The wheel is an old and spoked wagon wheel. Set upright, just out of the vertical, it has been wrapped in several layers of blue-tinted polythene. Within layers of the polythene parts of cut-out words are discernible, but rarely a whole word; and all of the part-words within only two of the wheel's quadrants.

These - *fa, ure, pa, car* and *inty* - are the word ends and beginnings that are decipherable in the uppermost quadrant.

In its opposite, the lowest quadrant, these word parts are visible - *ete, elves, cert, stic* and *cove*.

My own supposition, based on current sayings and preoccupations, is that the part-words put together the upper quadrant will say - *Certainty is our one faith* and *The past carries us into the future*.

I'm more confident of the lower quadrant, that put together the pieces and their obscured parts will say, *Uncertain we consider only ourselves, cover the land in concrete and the seas in plastic*.

This is an outdoors installation, the slope of the wheel being set under a truncated drainpipe. During, or for a period after rain, water dribbles down over the polythene, ripples further obscuring the words already partial. Drips from the polythene enter a cream enamel bucket, which regularly overflows. Clearly visible and printed in black on the bottom of the bucket is the one word, **LOSS**.

The soundscape has a by-the-yard rhythm section of snare drum, electric piano, bass and pan-pipes; with the two words *fake* and *placebo* being repeated at seeming random, sometimes one word on its own, although more often at a one breath run - *fake fake fake... placebo placebo...* Which can at times segue, the two words distorted and slurred together, into alternative pairings - *fakeplacebo, placebofake*.

And then... One's own *fake placebo* is saying something other, is where thought has gone and internally carries on growing the contradictory concept. More of one's own words get dotted and slotted between and about the snare drum, piano, bass and pan-pipes, clothing and enveloping the rough idea within spongy flesh; until all without has become background mush.

fake placebo

every note
of every
musical
instrument
aspires to
the singular
clarity
of a bell

In the Gallery Canteen

In the gallery canteen, carrying my tray, I manoeuvre
between chairs, seeking a table where
I can sit with my back to the words.

Words here run in a frieze around the walls
and have been etched into a frosted strip
across the canteen windows. One set
of wall words is a long quote from a Laureate,
the other single words and part phrases –
the result of a primary school ‘poetry project’.

I won’t repeat any of the words on this page.
Nouns and adjectives have been chosen because
they supposedly describe where they are,
those on the glass - depending on the season – what’s beyond.
Having been read so often they possess now
only the capacity, not to inspire, but to irritate.

Whenever I enter the gallery I have to look to the right
to avoid more ‘project’ words that have been carved into
a block of stone set by the doors. But one particular word,
unavoidable because inlaid into the floor beside the stack of trays,
subconsciously read again and again, has come to seem
the tritest, the most excruciating word in current usage.

Wheels Within Wheels:

examples of juxtaposition & proximity

Dear There is a fashion for sampling single words **I** from various texts and redisplaying them in other **hardest** settings, either singly on otherwise blank pages **next**, or in condensed combinations taken from the **me** same text; or even - as here - placed within other **phone** and often unrelated texts. The text I have chosen to **stay** sample is a letter of abandonment, a *Dear John*. **touch** Taking the 1st word from the 1st line of the **come** letter, the 2nd word from the 2nd line, 3rd from **despite** the 3rd, *et cetera* - unless the word so alighted upon **hourly** is an article **need** or otherwise link word, in which case the next **despite** word has been chosen. When the end of a line **year** has been reached I have started again with the 1st **true** word from **faithful** the line below, continuing in more or less zig-zag **warmth** fashion down through the letter. All of those **bear** sampled words have been redisplayed here in **good** bold.

Dear John,

When I **begin** by saying that, in my whole life, this has been the **hardest** letter that I've had to write, you have to know what's coming **next**. So all that remains is for me to explain my decision. Let **me** say that I've been truly grateful for all your letters, **phone** calls, emails & texts, for every effort you have made to **stay** in touch, and that includes the flowers and presents. But it is **touch** that I have **come** to realise is what I miss and need above all else. Because, **despite** the letters, despite the long phone calls, even the **hourly** texts some days, I really do need to feel some warmth. I **need** to hold and to be held. So when you chose – and **despite** the pressures you cite you did choose – to stay away another year, I decided – and I know that I swore to be faithful & true to you, but by choosing to stay away are you being faithful & true to me? – that I have to find some human **warmth**. I cannot **bear** even the thought of another year enclosed by emptiness. Take **good** care of yourself.

Oh the irony

Pop Art's **POW!**
Wham!
Does he love me?

Let us pretend
that we are coloured newsprint
and of the common people

show us metres wide
in hushed galleries
and excitable auction rooms

Oh
the irony

The Half-smile That His Listeners Wear

He first tells us that he is at home
in himself
(full of himself? empty of thought?)
goes on to relate
slowly
the 'interior experiences
of his ineffable self'

Eager for praise
he says he wants us to eat his words
flavoured with garlic
scorched by lightning
spiced with cardamon

His obvious vanity
(hat-wearing indoors:
romantic heroes do not lose their hair)
is no threat to us

The danger of extinction is elsewhere
that huge sump of the intellectually challenged
and the spiritually corrupt
ready always to drag us back into barbarity

As Here

Contemptuous of all engineered excitements my life experience is no stream of consciousness, more an enclosing mist. But how to convey that state of partial awareness, voices off not quite heard? I want to keep on saying, “I don’t know,” than to pretend that I do. How can I know? There’s too much of it. Just too much. All that I truly know is negatives. I don’t feel quite like that, don’t wholly agree with ...

When you live among junkies and alkie and you want only to get on with your own life, while all around you are trying to get rid of theirs, each one of those chemically-controlled human forms glimpsed out the window, passed in the street, provokes a dismissive grunt ...

As to beauty. Beauty? We recognise something from somewhere unremembered — a cloud shape? a sunset? — and we exclaim that it is beautiful. But in truth the sunset, the cloud, hasn’t moved us, aside from to speak, it is only something we have recognised from a painting, or a photograph, which just by its having been put up on a wall, or included in a magazine, was saying that it was worth looking at...

Here then is the shallow truth of me; and shallow though it may be, no matter how often I say it, rephrase it, as soon as it is in words it too becomes false, becomes artificial. Same for all our limited capacity for absorbing experience: science and religion go seeking, in the step-by-step logic of madness, contemporary explanations for both new and ancient phenomena. While most new art now defeats its purpose in drawing attention only to itself. As here.

Polemic — in the shape of a poem
because we have been conditioned by poetry
to treasure the English countryside
— poetry being a weapon of rebellion
and the countryside having always
been under threat from those
who claim to own it.
Been etched upon our collective psyche
therefore
appealing images of gnarled trees
standing anciently alone
in dappled pastures; and conjunctions
of ragged hedgerows, cross-hatchings
of fields...
all made icons.
But
when you come to look at what
you have been trained to love
— shape of woman, lie of land
and you know the one is
silicon synthetic, at best cosmetic,
and the other poison-sprayed, then
pleasure dies in the eyes.

Beside glowing upland lakes of yellow rape
fields of blue flax reflect squares
of powdered sky; and cloud shadows
go flying on over sterile oblongs
of young corn and darken
the black glistening field spawn of
plastic-wrapped silage.
Love this.

If Hungry for Legends, or Tourists, Invent ...

(inspired by the tale of the Black Angel, Illinois)

Role of midwives fell
traditionally to witches,
attracted superstitions ...

Truth is (could be)
every birth attended
mocked her grief.
How, though, to be bitter
at the undeserving alive,
at the slippery newborn,
at the rawly unformed.

She placed her energies instead
in the commission of statuary,
lost herself in wrangles
of concept versus execution.

And still her son is dead,
still her son is dead.

This is mortality, angel.
Study it.

Curtains of Red Stone

hang above the steepled city.

Flat-footed swans
take their time
crossing the road.
A woman in a long black coat
walking as slowly
looks down at her feet
and into her concerns.

In the botanic gardens
palms and primordial ferns
have been wrapped around
with vertical swathes of straw
and parcelled in bin liners
becoming again winter's corner
groupings of headless torsos.

A couple in clean clothes,
slim and tanned,
swiftly carry their sneers
around the small gallery,
a piece of the city's rubbish
stuck to the man's shoe.

Seen Into

horizons carved from sky
bone and stone stand alone

from a closed-in and
leaf-wet garden

inverted drops
shine a hole

through Battersea Park
and New York

& Barbara Hepworth
continues to speak

in a language
beyond words

beyond culture
strikes some

primordial chord
eyes well &

the throat
constricts

with a glad recognition
that rock will outlast us?

& finding oneself
content that is so

We Lived upon Milk and Were Enemies to War

It is not given to everybody to save everyone.
It is not given to anybody to save anyone.
It is not given.

Driven rain smokes off black slate roofs.
Window glass is buffeted, ears wind-cuffed.
Leaf-heavy boughs are brought to ground.
Small birds — robin and dunnock,
and a scowling greenfinch —
keep low in low bushes.

On entering the company of that labelled Nature, or Sacred (and all religion is sentimentality sanctified), but especially when encountering Art, then fat, wide-eyed women pucker up and quiver with sensibility. Thinner women — clothed in sound — for privacy, for passing identity — in gallery queues turn to glance over each other, while being channelled through exhibits heaped upon the floor. Across the way, in a theatre's polished foyer, were large glossy photographs of a neglected building site. At the end of a rubbish world the art has to be made of rubbish, or made to resemble rubbish. (In any life there are those you can con and those you can't.) And rubbish collects rubbish as litter attracts litter. Any artist worth their salt now would piss in Duchamps' urinal. Instead the punters are drawn to the gallery windows, to watch the others out there. Head forward, men and women, pacing every street and alley, anger taking a walk. Detonations are a stumble, a shoulder bump, someone slow in front. Whole cities now are made of paper, are sustained by paper. Watch a city explode. Paper, paper everywhere. Writing about it is just a way of forgetting.

A Cloistered Life

A man of minuscule talent but much reading
his were never shy loves or romantic yearnings.

Other than with himself he has to pay for sex, keeps
a parade of sneers above his grubby trouser secrets.

Said by apologists not to tolerate fools gladly, aloof,
his every caustic aside is but a bookish quote.

Concerned less with ideals than with earnings
he has produced works allegedly metaphysical.

Not so: a bubble puffed out by learning he is yet
just another intellectual frightened of the simply said.

His were never shy loves or romantic yearnings.

The Lesson

With glass bricks I build a glass wall.
With transparent colours I paint upon the wall
a scene beyond.

Some come and pass comment on the scene.
More stoop to examine the interstices
and artifices of my construction.

A grey cat tiptoes through a grey light,
a fat man goes chuckling after his own farts;
and for all the colours of your existence
you will return to the brown of earth.
(Beware here semi-appearance,
any resonance without meaning.)

Connotations cling like smells to words.
Words though are only the molehills
pushed up by our labyrinthine
thoughts and feelings.
Measure words against death's enormity
and always they are inadequate,
always they make trivial the hurt and the pain.
Such words are instantly self-mocking
unfit to deal with death's eternal indifference.

You are seeing this through the unseen.

Use any words truthfully
in a totalitarian state,
where every act, other than acceptance, is political
and you dare oblivion.

Context and character is all.
You are what you see.
You see what you are.

Not Metaphor, Not Simile Ideas Wrapped in Imagery

and requiring the imposition
of narrative, as on the randomly
generated sights and events
in dreams:

the black lace of trees
stencilled onto fog, part wall stones
become a castle of bones. A dog,
shouted at, drops and cowers
splay-legged, much as

a hackneyed dancer
aping fear. Hunched-over man,
with an insouciance that speaks
familiarity, carries the cold indoors
on his coat, sitting has both hands
curled around a warming cup,
dog at his feet.

You don't know
you've been asleep
until you wake up.

Not Communication

Seen, heard, thought; whatever its form, sex has an emotive impact. We think, glimpse, acts; we do things, have them thought about us, done to us, do them, which once done we are unable to undo. We take our histories to our every new relationship. Even a whole love, however, cannot benefit from the truth entire. Nor will the amassed experience of the lover, a lifetime's familiarity, be more than one form of knowing. Of part-knowing; because, if any love is to be sustained, there are some truths which cannot be said. (Such truths are mind tumours.) Love/sex, therefore, cannot be communication. Even before that — the long looks into the other's eyes, the hand lingering on the arm, tingle fingers touching shoulder, the belief that you are in the company of a kindred spirit — can be shattered with the first words. Between human beings, where love nor sex is part of the transaction, language is the sole means of unequivocal communication. And then it, for example this, is imperfect.

**To Be Cool Is
To Be Familiar With Humanity's
Many Foibles
and All Its Artefacts**

Background is a washed-out, floral pattern wallpaper. A wooden rack of palm-shined briars stands over tobacco shreds of brown & gold straying from a partially unfolded packet. Red-tipped matches peep from a pushed-open box bracketed by bent wire pipe-cleaners. Foreground is crumpled foil, a flame-stained spoon, empty syringe, knife with burn-crust blade, a plastic bottle minus its base, tilted wine glass, window-reflecting bottle, and a silver corkscrew with, rolled away, a dark-speckled cork.

Pretty Ideas Are Usually Fatal

Dry summer nights, if we were lucky,
in the grey pasture between the two stiles

my brother and I collected green glowworms
from among mats of black grass stalks.

In our bungalow bedroom we emptied them
into a glass dome. (The stuffed hummingbirds

— static, faded, soundless, unjewelled
had been thrown out.) While the lit beetles

crawled about the fistful of twisted grass
we stayed up late hurting our eyes

reading by their moving light. Pretty ideas
are usually fatal.