

FACTORY NIGHTS: HANLEY BUS STATION

I.

Who could have foreseen this ending
when they dreamed it up
with such optimism - those drawings
of sunlit arches, bougainvillea
on bustling walkways,
perfectly defined shadows
across glazing? What happened
to those hipster, Wrangler kids,
the well-heeled Letraset women
stalking in their pencil skirts
towards an unimagined
new century?

II.

It is a tide breaking on the shore
of the Potteries, all day in and out
like the roll of pebbles on cold beaches,
a down-at-heel pleasure pier
landlocked in the English Midlands.
You'll want to disembark, to hurry to the city
that shelters behind its gimcrack façade, for this
is no welcome for tourists.
Yet there's something of the seaside
all washed up, that gaudy fragility,
the smell of ozone, a hint of ammonia.

III.

The scrap heap's where I'll be
when this disappears in six months time,
maybe twelve, who knows?
I've seen business come and go
like buses – the needles, the muggings,
the dossers, the shops
closing one by one, the toilets. That
was the beginning of the end when
they closed the toilets. And the internet.
But still we're always busy. I don't know
where they come from, our regulars.
They sit and ask for credit and sometimes,
because I know them, they get it.
Don't tell the boss. He's OK but even he
can't stop this rot. At my age
I don't see it matters much. I can go home,
spend time with the grandkids. It's the others
I worry about - out of work
and soon enough on the scrap heap
like this place.

IV.

It is near Christmas and we are chilled
though we see art everywhere:
in the light show of passengers,
the fabric of conversation,
the choreography of railings and roofs.
What kind of art would you like to see here?
No answer comes, at least none that can be heard,
only between the words a look that says
art? It's too late for that now.
Yet it is easy to rest in the past,
to be cynical of the future. There is courage just
in opening a sketch book, searching between cracks
in pavements. There is renewal
in standing in the city
inventing it afresh.

V.

Connexions

Walkaden Shoe Repairs We Sell Christmas Dinners

Trentham, Coalville, Cheadle, Chell.

How about something to keep you going?

Sainsbury's Triple Distilled Vodka?

Except buses, Premier Pool Club

Saxonfields, Espa, Biddulph, Tean.

Mow Cop Azza Kesic Chris.

Cherry Farm, Banda Bingo

Blue Buses Blurton.

Show's Over.

Stone.

VI.

Nightclub

Voyeurs, we glue our eyes to the window,

finding gaps scratched in purple paint

as if a story will unreel,

a what-the-butler-saw of scandal behind.

The picture is smoke-damaged, a silent movie.

You have to invent your own drama

from overturned tables, a menu,

stairs to nowhere, a floor carpeted

in pigeon shit.

VII.

In the new world
a frond of glass and steel
will unfurl to embrace you,
buses caked in clay
will dock like worker bees
bringing pollen from the suburbs
to the new world. There will be hotels
and restaurants, maxi multi-plexes
and all will be in its proper order:
cars and people, arts and commerce,
delivery and despatch.
This old hive will be reduced to dust,
and all its stories, not forgotten,
will be shelved like honeycomb
remembering the taste of
coffee, fried onions, oatcakes.
For another forty years
all will hum along perfectly
in the new world.

Jeff Phelps is a novelist, poet and architect with a strong interest in places and the people who use and inhabit them. His poem River Passage about the Severn in Bridgnorth won second prize in the Stand international poetry competition in 2000 and has been produced as a booklet and CD by Offa's Press with music by Dan Phelps. His first two novels were set in the Black Country of the Midlands and in the northern resort of New Brighton respectively. He is currently working on his third novel.

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