

*David Harsent*  
Night

*Insomnia: that great educator.*

– Corneil Lefevre

*i*

This can only occur at night; it's how and why he's woken  
to stillness, wide-eyed, in a frowzy nest

of broken images the best of which inflicts  
a rich reward on that faithless bitch he'd more than half-forgotten.

His bone-breaker laugh  
unlocks the doors, starts the pump, brings on the boiler, lights the lamp,

uncaps the single malt. Maybe she'll star  
in *Sluts I'd love to hump* or *MILF gets ripped*, a tell-tale stain

curdling the white of her eye. We'll see. A gentle rain sets down  
on the skylight. At this dead hour it must be right

to celebrate the serial sots, the virtuoso piss-  
artists, who drink to wipe the slate, to leave no trace. He tops his glass

and salutes their grace-in-misery no less  
than the naked rage, the face-off with fate, the shaken cage, the loss

of hearth and home, of a room much like the one  
he sits in now, forfeit to a slip of the tongue, to the last

and best of the bottle, the hot synaptic blip  
that somehow bridged Friday and Monday, the taste of heavy metal

in gutter-waste. A black breeze stirs the rainfall;  
the window gives onto darkness and that's all. He's blind to chance

and he knows it. The lost girl and the drunks  
are regulars in the nightly song-and-dance, the real-time dreams.

Is it wrong to be so addicted to grime and grief?  
Perhaps; but he'll see this out: sidelined, in hock to happenstance.

*ii*

The gulp and lurch of apnoea, a full five-second blank,  
no help for it; he tanks then breaks the surface with a yelp,  
  
his body out of place, as if he'd torn  
and repaired cockeyed, himself reborn, which must be why he hears  
  
the voice instructing him on how to better live his life, to give  
more than is received, to recompense the deceived, to make amends  
  
for all that's yet to come, to muck-out the slum he calls a mind,  
to sign away his nest-egg of regret, to scrub the list of sorrows, to forget  
  
the twist in the tail, the badass schemes, to swim  
no longer in the river of dreams, to finally drop his fist,  
  
to accept that everything is more or less what it seems:  
whisky-fever, birdsong out of darkness.

*iii*

A quarter moon, livid like a burn-scar. An airbus drops  
into the Heathrow corridor. A vixen yips with pleasure-pain.  
  
Time to backtrack, time to review his bond  
with calamity, the usual brand of folly, the necessary payback  
  
to the dark-eyed tallyman. A radio voice  
updates him on the party at the end of the world: his plan  
  
for which involves the girl of his dreams, his drug of choice  
and to stand four-square to the meteor as it streams  
  
through the troposphere trailing  
clouds of glory, seas boiling, the air on fire  
  
and the earth singing deep in its core... The voice gives way  
to radio silence; a step on the stair  
  
reminds him: a room in a sunlit square, the girl  
in question, the rule they made always to ride their luck  
  
which left them, soon enough, looking back and looking up  
at the room from the street, having shed the names  
  
they knew each other by, hearing the last, lost beat  
of the music that, one time, drew them in, and nothing clear

or certain ever again: the slow shifting of woodland at dusk;  
a border crossing, unmapped; the unwalkable roofscape silhouette.

*iv*

From the window, lights of windows and the brittle, thin  
example of himself almost within reach, almost shoulder to shoulder

with what might seem the real thing  
somewhat older and closer to the dark, the image broken

by bars of shadow, a strikeout, the back-reflected racks  
of stuff he'll never read or listen to. His night-long stakeout

brings a sudden wonderment, a small procession  
of ghosts among fern and dogwood before they turn their backs

and drift down the garden path, as if the dead  
really had somewhere to get to, as if the life-long burden

of things unsaid might be dumped in such a place,  
or a blood-debt settled, or a curse unravelled thread by thread.

Their own weather comes with them, a sort of smothering,  
then owl and night-crow together, home to roost.

Nothing as hard as memory lost-and-found, nothing as sad  
as these refugees of the false dawn. From the window, a graveyard.

*v*

Here is the news. Whatever you most despise will have its day;  
money will rise from the dead; expect to see

strangers lining the streets; reports now indicate  
the saving grace will surely come too late; a wall of rain

and sheet lightening like flak the weathermen advise:  
the long reach of Abu Ghraib feedback, of IED kickback.

Watching this unfold, himself and no other; the skies  
fill then fade to black. 'He was my sole delight,' says the grieving mother.

*vi*

A loose door knocking in an empty house;  
a mirror framing a single reflection, undisturbed; a chair  
  
still somehow bearing the weight... He's dreamed all this before  
and seems to wake in that unearthly place  
  
sanctuary of the weevil and the louse,  
slippage behind the skim... except he's rough-hauled back  
  
on a stalled breath to the night-watch  
that substitutes for the dream; his duty then to check  
  
statistics, to itemise the download, to keep track  
of the trade in flesh, of the how and where and when of the recent dead,  
  
of traffic in the city of ashes, city of lies and loss,  
of the breakage and spillage, the more-is-less, to take especial note  
  
of the burnouts, the turncoats, the hard cash used to freight  
the pockets of the drowned man, of the life-in-light  
  
promised to all who gave their names,  
of the way the whole grid dims when someone throws the switch,  
  
of the perfect match power makes with innocence, of games  
played out to the last man in the last ditch, of the mendicant poor  
  
in seemly rows, the wayside shrines, the cry  
that returns and returns, the empty houses, the men awake at windows.

*vii*

A troubled mind. Black actuality. The little wheels  
that tick and turn. How it feels when the mad machine cranks up  
  
and the room breeds shadows out of dusk. The small, bright burn  
of recollection. The way each image feeds  
  
off the last, and so proceed. The unborn,  
as if they knew. Debt and reckoning. The sudden jostle and press  
  
of faces in the glass. The smell of lechery. The one sure thing,  
unchanging, unable to change. The last of the safe places.  
  
The long, low tremor of grief. The chain of dreams. The loss  
that might have gone unnoticed except—

The night-wind again. The shape of a slow dance in air: the way  
she would enter a room bringing nothing with her

or what passed for nothing. A state of shame.  
How blame goes from hand to hand, a truth best told

in the fable of the leper's kiss. How the dead come home, as they must.  
How nothing repairs or restores. How love will enable fear.

The way words dissolve in air, even the best.  
The depth of darkness. The heartbeat rhythms of prayer.

*viii*

That time backs up in a stopped clock is the only way to explain  
how every night is one night, topped and tailed

by the same ill-wish, same terror, same storyboard  
in which his anger kindles a dirty flame; and still

the same chair, same book, same page: *In plain air then I fled,*  
*but the Godhead stalked and stunned me; there I fell,*

*on my knees among the furrows, lost and found...*  
And the self-same radio voice with the worst news, as before;

and the girl in the two-minute movie, her raw pink;  
and the first drink calling on the next; and the double deal

of the self-told lie; and sleep-in-waiting as a nest of rooms  
in the smallest and deepest of which a narrow bed

summons its dreamer... yes, and his face looking back  
from the window wherein he seems to cry and seems to speak.

*ix*

In this, the Bridge of Sighs; in this, pi-dogs  
scavenge a tip; in this, the soft disguise of kohl and candlelight;

in this, his heavy smile; in this, a bright  
gunmetal gleam where sea and sky collide; in this, they're laughing

at a child in tears; in this, a novice bride  
takes to the floor; in this, the last of its kind stares through the bars;

in this, a water-garden beyond an open door; in this,  
a woman walks through naked... There should be some kind of law

to govern such vigils: the images flow in and flood; the clock  
fights back; his heart holds off a moment. In this, the city's all-night glow.

x

He dreams his room as a breeze-block lock-up, place of pain,  
wall of manacles, blindfold and gag, a thing in freeze-frame

that won't come into focus, but seems to sag  
into its own blurred weight, blotched where you might expect

to find eyes or mouth, blotched where it breaks or forks.  
The keyholes are plugged, the doors blindsided, a cross-hatched spread

of light rolls out across the concrete floor, as if a streetlamp shone  
through a window-grille; this is a dream where the sun

never quite comes up, where he goes in dread  
of clean skins on the airbus, a knock from the coffin, the dead end

doubling as the sheer drop, where he finds himself a full step light  
of the room at last, and there's nothing, now, to hold the man from the night.