

👉 **Double Feature** 👈

John Wilkinson's Poetry

New Year 2022

There are other lighthouses, guidance systems
more definite than the beam you trust
still shines out your course.

Reviled but past
comprehending, gods of code calculate,
blind faith in every keypress met with scorn, you
really thought that, huh, but watch for a delay:
between your pointer and its target,
malign, intellectual angels interfere
from further-out clusters. Still you trust a jagged
reach of light as if a runway: ahead is the channel
gods permit you to enter and die in,
free to bail out, take your life in your hands –
latrine where bodies in bright shirts float,
a channel stuttering between tents
whose sheets never decompose,
but as coloured banners billow
on indifferent squalls, spasms,
dumps of fellow feeling, these jostle you
this way and that,
while you carve a course down the lit channel
between unwindowed blocks where data-blocks
bind with life sequencing the vast edges drear.
Given just an inch from what's taken.
Buffeted by sudden floodlight gusts.

Volodia

Who would hear were hearing a pith voice sheathed
by the act of hearing?

What did he hold in reserve, with transmission
shrouded as though hearing's echo?

It is his inside
his singing hood his solitary his without feign swoops
about the ears.

Who would hear the dirt he will within his hood grind
would hear the harp a bough dangles
swept and struck,

threading through what's trafficked as his inside gen,
genuine feeling –

or spoken in the marrow out of hymnody
him whose likeness were ghosting from his hood,
each more real than real, his starveling illusions flit –

likenesses
not to be released even two years after dying
due to TB and his harsh repeated beatings, his name
effaced.

soaked mattresses

belongings dumped after work –

not to be released in paperwork.

2.

Image not to be retained on file, name to be revoked,

It has to be his blood

sings aloft, spiralling on thermal high alert, fit falcon
killing with a look.

My genuine likeness has the dirt.

My likeness swoops and cracks and jabs at bones
the mountain slope is littered with.

Sky tumbled bones.

But he bore no likeness being stopped and searched,
being naked as the day

He had been registered, he had been born,
naked as the pith

beaten out to parchment where a death warrant
would be drawn up in duplicate and stamped,
word-for

word put to rights, carbon sheathed:

Volodia, Volodia, I hear you, do I

3.

She said I have your back. You know

I'm your blood, but I have your back. This dress
has many pockets. An apron of small instruments
honouring your loved ones. I conceive
your dress is dirndl, and it flaps along the untrodden
path towards the axis. As if a path
could be untrodden.

Ocarina, finger cymbals, jew's harp, these stick out
of the back they had been lodged in,

All the books sag. My back

had been pecked by birds, my eyes were

saturated, there could be no travel, no divergence,
no temperature gradient, no measurable scale,
no skin, homeostatic.

Volodia, you will have died another death if two-by-two
swap words, swap looks, swap touches,
high -pitched hash leaks from a leather hood—
some vestige I seize,
claim for my interior voice, this skin of sound, this
mantle I wear and hear and duplicate,
turned out in my effrontery,

Cal Bedient
John Wilkinson's
Swing



1. "The Swing"

"The Swing" is the opening 33-page serial poem of John Wilkinson's collection, *Reckitt's Blue* (2012). It is continued in the second, 14-page series "What Gives," so in referring to "The Swing" I will sometimes be indicating both. Comprising the first half of the book, it is this English poet's most imaginative and linguistically virtuosic poetry to date. I would hail this major poem as his break into fertile writing if he had not switched manners several times since (something drives him into more and more experimentation). The two series take a frequently comic but rather trembling vengeance against the sexual flaunt in Fragonard's iconic rococo painting *The Swing* (1767), that gorgeous anecdote of a young woman's promiscuous exhibitionism on a red-velvet swing in a lush garden. Her body engulfed in a turbulent cloud of distressed voluptuous silk—a dress pink and white like a Penelope

rose—she opens the hem by raising a leg and kicking off a pink shoe, which somehow twists upside down (an exacting realism is not the strength of the painting). It is a sort of girly performance for her young admirer below, hiding in the bushes. Her aged husband is a dim figure in the background—for what is a man without virility? A fond smile on his face, he waits in the shadows to give the swing another sorry substitute for a pumping thrust. (Reckitt's Blue is a discontinued English laundry cleaner. Scrub, scrub, out spot.)

The poem does nothing so dutiful as narrate the painting; it isn't ekphrastic in any ordinary sense. Rather, it comes across as a brilliantly controlled expression of the speaker's sexual anxieties, fluttering, fearful, fascinated. Wilkinson's speaker is not about to step onto the promiscuous, inexhaustible, unfathomable, turbulent, and vibrant grounds of the garden (adjectives for the libido supplied by Jean-Luc Nancy in *The Deconstruction of Sex*, 2021, with Irving Goh). But the poem savors in snippets the painting's erotic fruits that, as if compulsively, it scatters through many pages.

The speaker as such has the privilege of being free of a plot. He alone is not a snapshot in an anecdote, narrated, described, turned upside down by lust or love. He dwells in the poem, the poem dwells in him. He is probably *right beside* one John Wilkinson, doubtless differing from him in various ways, but only the poet knows how. His advantage, something of a sore one, is that he can't be suckered into the sexual or any other opening onto nothingness, the poem's theme (for, yes, a startling new metaphysical gulf opens in Wilkinson's work in this poem), so long as he continues to speak, which is for a long time. He cries "How fleet! How fated! How filmed! How fixed!" (41), in pseudo-agitation, as if genuinely tortured by the way living in a media-laden ("filmed") time circumscribes being, mirroring it back suffocatingly. But his own personality, his disposition, is in a quantum state, hard to locate.

Recurrences of fear there are, however: if an imperious sexual drive didn't disturb and even shock the speaker, especially because it lays bare emptiness, he would seem an automaton and we wouldn't have the

fun of watching him squirm or grow dramatically alarmed, even as he outsmarts and outpaces us. In all, he might be going around muttering, I'm *not* going to bone, I'm *not* going to bone. And he doesn't. Conjecturally, the specter of an essentially *empty* phallus is in the way. Lying there also, stretched out, is his allusion to Courbet's well-known painting of a naked woman supinely vagina-forward to the spectator, the painting thunderously called "The Origin of the World" (1866). In *Powers of Horror*, Julia Kristeva speaks of the primitive terror of a maternal engulfment, which of course would mean the loss of a speaking self. On the one side, then, an empty phallus, and on the other the origin of the world waiting to overtake it, and an inhabited consciousness besides, sealing the emptiness.

The realizations of the nothingness of sexual being and of the subsidiary "nudity" of language—they unfold in that order—are made with a ruthless awareness, unmoved by lust or beauty, for all the speaker's mocking pretence of being oh so sexually vulnerable. Standing back has from the first been Wilkinson's poetic position. His wits have been ironic and destructive and he is never without them. You have to have them if you are going to pierce through spectacular shows of sex and greenery with a Buddhist or Ecclesiastical perspective, all the way to the emptiness beyond death (death, after all, is not nothing). You have to have seen to the removal of your arteries.

I am tempted to call Wilkinson's early manner abstract, but the term isn't revealing enough: the old manner (to speak of a family of styles as singular for convenience) consists of a sort of displacement of referentiality into a space just beside both denotation and connotation. No jolts of recognition. Style as a scrim before the world of objects. If you go straight to objects, to their everydayness and resistance to being etherealized, you, as a brainy imaginative poet with a lexicon full of Latinate words, are diminished—so Wilkinson may have felt. Unlike the object, an avant-garde image is always there ahead of familiarity, and remains inassimilable. In *Artmachines* (Edinburgh University Press, 2016), Anne Sauvagnargues speaks of Deleuze and Guattari's differentiations among the naturalistic image-of-the-object, the hermetic image-for-consciousness, and yet a third one, which "abandons the ontology of

representation . . . to establish itself on the surface" (50). Type 1, the image of an object: "A helicopter's blades struggle against the molasses darkness." Type 2, an image for consciousness: "We who are husbands of death / slip through light with our acid tensivity." Type 3, an image erected on the surface, not an "amputated representation": "Such screens pan out veins as day's eye closes; like an unbroken clickclack tolls / through the horizon ring, feeds // filature to its underside, diverted, bled across, / opalescent when focus pulls" (*Schedule of Unrest: Selected Poems*, pp. 160, 45, and 194 respectively). Wilkinson has made use of all three types, but less of the first than the others. Which was been limiting.

If you've experienced shocks of nothingness, which may encourage a hooded manner (after all, a hollow world deserves no better). If you want, even so, to convey it, what's to stand between you and the void? To start off with the philosophical concept "void" is to end the game before it begins. What is the force of finding "nothing there" if you haven't put anything there? Kant thought you had to have something there or else go mad. Psychoanalysis says the same. Phenomena are your friends. Poetry wants a dialectic.

What I see as a signal transformation of Wilkinson's poetry in "The Swing" can be put simply: on the one hand, with previously undisplayed vigor, the poem acknowledges an objective reality—in the first and major instance, Fragonard's painting, an object displaying objects. At the same time, it evokes the antithesis of objective reality, namely *nothing at all*, an intuition or concept that the earlier poetry may engage but does not make explicit.

In *Lyric in its Times: Temporalities in Verse, Breath and Stone* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2019), a book of astonishingly trenchant and flawless readings, Wilkinson develops a theory of the poem as, in Winnicott's term, a "transitional object"—Linus's blanket, as the poet wittily names it—that escorts the fearfully shut-up infant's mind, that locus of narcissism, terror, and terrorism, to the relatively friendly external world. As a former psychiatric nurse and administrator in England, Wilkinson ought to know the transitional process better than most. Yet his theory of transition is prosodic—a testing of