

## Project for a Hermitage: Five Poems

By **Roger Connah**

### The House of Paradox

After years of thinking you could write  
you have forgotten how to  
and yet you dream of making good the unwritten  
as the alarms and sirens go continuously now.

Nothing in the contract to bring an end  
to such disturbances  
The House of Paradox sees to that  
bending backwards the dreams of known words,  
the slips of illusion so lightly oiled now  
inside the skull.

And crawling back to the desk  
lightly topped with its leather inset  
you assemble as many extra thin black pens  
in the hope, like before –  
when war and melancholia had its day –  
they could just take up this project  
make the words themselves  
and leave you once more out of all this muddle  
that language makes of us all.



**Roger Connah**

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**Roger Connah**, associate professor at the Azrieli School of Architecture & Urbanism, Carleton University, Ottawa, Canada, has taught, curated exhibitions and produced films over the past three decades in Finland, India, Sweden, Pakistan, Canada, the United States and the UK. He is the author of numerous books, including *The Rest Is Silence – Art & Society in Pakistan* (2011), *Ian Ritchie – Being: An Architect* (2014), *The School of Exile, For or Against Theory* (2015), *The Ecstasy of No Further Communication* (2015), *Sick City – Mediated Urbanism* (2016). He is currently working on a book on Thomas Merton, tentatively entitled *The Scriptomaniac*.

## **A Study of Weeping**

The hermitage is filled with ash and books  
 They even enter now when your back is turned.  
 More space is made each day  
 yet today there is not one single sentence left in you.

The books persist in arriving after announcing  
 their presence elsewhere  
 and without as much as a greeting  
 take their place on the un-dusted ashen shelves.

It was here in the hermitage  
 that planning and writing virtually ceased  
 that you abandoned one more scheme  
 to work on the world's first exhaustive  
 study of weeping.

It is true, of course, words do still trickle out  
 but not like before, when they were mined for a  
 success they could never achieve.

Instead they now mime an anxiety  
 you can no longer feel, they  
 numb the parts of the body  
 now inaccessible, now alone,  
 as they sit in awe of the terror that must not arrive.

## **The Eagle Waiting to Swoop**

The emotive tears they say, the irritant ones  
 have long been researched and found performable.  
 They flow, they keep on flowing  
 but few get near as those cried out  
 those sobbed out, drenching the rest of mankind.  
 These, the tears we need more than ever

The trips out of the Hermitage have got shorter  
 not so far now. Nothing invites the dream of distance  
 Everything encourages us to turn the lock  
 put the chain across the door.

Yet when we do venture out, we breathe  
 deep in the estuary where the boats lean  
 against the morning tide and the gulls sweep  
 for discarded bits of the foetus jettisoned in haste.

Should we be at a loss how to go on?  
 Should we learn again how to put one foot in front  
 of the other without tripping up those behind,  
 those we push out of the way when the alarm goes?

Then the sirens sound again  
 and the small package on the seat nearby or the  
 person running to mount the bus proves  
 to be one you missed out of the corner of the eye.

The blind spot so neatly placed by the one seeking  
 heaven, the one inviting us to think of the desert,  
 the mountain and the high flying eagle waiting to swoop.

### **What about Next Year?**

Outside the hermitage, the city still weeps  
 People take boats out.  
 There are shouts across the lake.  
 Dogs barking.  
 Serious hooliganism is in the air  
 The mist is on the verge of a nervous breakdown  
 A bird should etch its way across the mirrored surface  
 as it might have done in previous poems  
 nearer to the lost reality.  
 But in yours, it doesn't.

Emptiness cannot conclude with respectability  
 nor can it be precise enough. Let us not wish for  
 the prettiness of language. For a serious hooligan  
 better this emptiness, or serious motoring  
 than a broken bottle  
 in the suburbs of the aching skull.

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Two cranes stood in the field  
 Up to their necks in dignity.  
 How to get the message through to them?

Next year, what about next year?

### **Friendly Fire**

The shudder in the room amongst all those cameras  
 is precise. The siege is on, the hermitage over-run.

Lest you mistake this unreason for anger, beware  
 I have heard talk of mouth-worn thoughts

The aged skin that hints at the lizard above the eyes  
 Takes in more injustice each day

I lie awake at night once again.  
 You find me in the bed in the guest room

I'm sick, you say,  
 so I search the skull for the pain

I find the flooded rivers of Italy and France  
 and the collapsed frontiers of Kashmir  
 buried under mountains we will never climb.

What can we do to serve those sudden deaths  
 that are so inexplicable for this time of year,  
 for any time of year?

I discover in the skull that isn't always my own  
 the towns and villages of Afghanistan  
 released from further pain if only briefly  
 cowering from accidental death from friendly fire.

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