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‘There goes the pretender
across the wide green’

There goes the pretender across the wide green, a white sheet marked with black letters in hand and these words repeating in his mouth covertly, ‘I’ve never understood the perception and determination of objects,’ he reads, ‘I’ve never understood sculpture as anything but a fetishised engagement with the matter of reality, intimately bound up with quasi-real ideas and contingent language.’

There goes the pretender, saying this as he walks. You watch him. You take a step back. And then you advance. Your trajectory, a baleful path, carries you towards the north-east side of a wide green in a park. Here, near the gate, there is an alcove, in its perfect entirety. The alcove is made of Portland stone with a fluted hemispherical hood and moulded architrave. A wooden bench is affixed around its concave interior. The exterior, tooled with an impost band, has a scrolled keystone, moulded blocks and half-balusters on its outer flanks. The base has a double-stepped plinth, as if for a sculpture. Underpinned by the logic of monument and memorial, this structure pronounces its significance with an inscription located centrally on its inner concave face.

Doubtless the man who approaches it, the pretender, will read the inscription when he finally gets here.

THIS ALCOVE WHICH STOOD ON
OLD LONDON BRIDGE
WAS PRESENTED TO HER MAJESTY
BY
BENJAMIN DIXON ESQ^{RE} JP
FOR THE USE OF THE PUBLIC
AND WAS PLACED HERE BY ORDER OF
THE RIGHT HONOURABLE W. COWPER
FIRST COMMISSIONER
HER MAJESTY'S WORKS AND PUBLIC BUILDINGS
1860

The words set in stone seem to carry the force of authenticity; they should have grounded the object but have already overwhelmed it with a flood of associations and interpretations, negating the 'being-here' of the stone, washing away the immediate certainty of your apprehension. As if the central cavity of the alcove is becoming two things simultaneously – a room the pretender might inhabit (with his doubts and suspicions), or a wide-open mouth, telling you something, whispering to you about absence it seems, absence and unrequited love, desire and disavowal.

If you do step back and look, the alcove asks you to speculate on the bridge from which it was



salvaged: Old London Bridge was a crooked and hysterical configuration, its confines exhibited the fullness of medieval human life – its ambition and barbarism, its commercial traffic and its wretched private spaces, with all their gloomy corners and skanky goings-on. Some two hundred multi-storey houses and shops were sited on it, along with gatehouses, a drawbridge, a chapel and a multi-seated public latrine that overhung the river. Perhaps the most infamous of the bridge's attributes was the display of severed heads – the remains of traitors, gruesomely preserved in tar and impaled on pikes. It drew the crowds. For many years old London Bridge teetered on the point of collapse, destabilised by the preposterous excess of its superabundance. On reading the inscription, some might be tempted to imagine the park's alcove came from the housed bridge. But it could not have been so – the last of the above features were demolished by 1762 at which point the alcoves were added. The park alcove may be part of this later refurbishment, but identical structures were removed from Westminster Bridge in the year the alcove appeared in the park, whereas those from the old London Bridge were removed some thirty years previously. Despite the inscription, both timing and contemporary records point to the fact that this alcove, although identical in form to those on London Bridge, may equally have come from old Westminster Bridge, a far less romantic provenance and less profitable for the seller no doubt. There is a matching alcove in the middle of a residential garden in a block of flats in Courtlands, East Sheen and another in the quadrangle at Guy's Hospital in





Southwark. As for the established but fragmented remains of the renowned old London Bridge, they are scattered, like dismembered body parts – some of the stones are in a wall in Wandsworth and others outside Wren’s church of St Magnus the Martyr, there are two balustrades in Myddelton House garden, in Enfield, and if you look above the door of the King’s Arms on Newcomen Street in Borough, you see the coat of arms that was above the bridge toll gate. Much of the rest of that bridge’s body was unceremoniously dumped in the river, its monumental and lumbering broken stones submerged. These weighted bones lie heavy with the elemental forces on the filthy riverbed, which is doubtless where some of the alcoves remain to this day.

Here comes the pretender across the wide green, a white sheet marked with black letters in hand and these words repeating in his mouth covertly, ‘I’ve never understood the perception and determination of objects,’ he reads, ‘I’ve never understood anything but quasi-real ideas and contingent language.’ Here comes the pretender, saying this, as he walks. When he finally reaches the stone alcove on the far side of the green, he sits down on a bench that curves conveniently around its interior wall. And as the fantastical apparition of the old bridge vanishes, the more reasonable demands of the everyday might reappear, but they don’t, because here he sits and repeats his mantra in a subdued tone, darkened by the stone walls. ‘How can the perception of objects be anything but fetishised?’ ‘Fetishised,’ he says again, mulling the word over and allowing it to rise up and circulate distastefully through the





wigged-out highs and low-down troughs of his imagination. A fetish for things is best kept to oneself, he thinks. Privately kept, obsessively maintained and nurtured; this is how such things develop into their full-blown and deviant shape, he confesses. And there his thoughts go, free to range across the topography of his mind.

He jumps up and stops abruptly, because now that his vision, and disposition, adjusts to the darkened space, he realises there is something in the alcove with him; and that something is lying on the shady ground. Inert. And so close to him. A black body. His feet jerk backwards. Involuntarily, a tiny bead of urine escapes from his penis. With a hand on the alcove wall. 'I like this stone,' he says, 'I could mention only this stone.'

For a moment he waits, and considers an exit – he would emerge from the alcove and decisively walk away from the scene. He gets up, but merely steps forward, and then back again, and then forward, and back, starting to leave, choosing to return. He says this is (step forward), a dark hole (step back). An obscure object (forward), now mine (back). A furtive gift (forward). A trap (back). What temptation? (forward) What hell? (back). To go (forward). To return (back). Repeated motion becomes a rocking – transferring compulsion from advance to retreat – it's an effort to breathe – with his mouth gasping – and his countenance flushed – with a sheen of perspiration – without the satisfaction of progression – until at last giddy thoughts shift from uncertainty to resolution. He draws himself to a halt with the words, 'Once more across the wide green.' This is





expressed more as a question than a statement, still he attempts to summon an unlikely optimism. He will step into the crepuscular half-light he says, but his knees weaken, damn them, preventing his legs from carrying him forward. They bend and buckle until finally he finds himself kneeling beside the body.

Although it appears to be a torso, it is not what he originally thought. It is a deep ebony rather than black, and its surface is flat, sleek and glossy with curious flashes of iridescence. He reaches forward, and realising what it is, he then grasps the form, eagerly. 'I've got you now babe,' he mutters, 'and you're a voluptuous little thing aren't you.' His clammy hand skims the creamy trimming of exaggerated outer contours, up and round a neck, long, narrow and extended far from the torso up again into a small but regally ornate head with three golden ear-like tuning keys on either side. Kneeling astride her now, he allows his fingers to creep past the nut, and on to the fretboard. Only three strings are detected: E, G and A. On their way back down the neck, his fingertips slip and trip over the frets, he counts on it above twenty, sensing the topological alternation between smooth mother-of-pearl inlay, wood-grain-textured board and the tiny potent ridges of the frets themselves. He touches the raised mound of its bridge, trembling. This complexly formed but miniature architectonic structure supports the strings above the body. When he gets to the metallic bridge pick-ups he sits staring at the G string then tries to insert his finger underneath it, but it's so taut that it resists. He aggressively plucks at it resulting





in nothing more than a dull buzz. ‘Tricksy little bitch,’ he says.

He twists the pick-up selectors then lifts the guitar up and sits on the bench, letting it rest across his thighs. As he tilts it forward and shifts the solid body weight towards his nascent hard-on, he discovers the attachment to a cable; the extent of it such that it leads a coiled and twisty route around the floor and beneath him. Amidst the gloom and against it his eyes strain until he distinguishes a small chargeable cube amp directly under the bench. Without investment in this electrifying dimension their encounter would surely be a cruel disappointment. He envisages this object empowered and stimulated by sound, burrowing inside it and resonating through its parts. He turns the volume and tone control knobs and starts to play. With just three strings this guitar is never going to sound impressive, however, the restraint and limitations of the dignified instrument are far surpassed by his evident lack of ability.

While he plays you take a step back and look at the alcove, it presents itself as nothing but the certainty of its being. An alcove, salvaged from a bridge and in the event of apprehension, when you do look very carefully, there is what can best be described as a disturbance that begins to intrude; something akin to a resonance that emerges from and then envelops the object. It brings with it a restlessness and the threat of discomposure. And with more particular attention to the nature of the disturbance, you come across a startling manifestation – there’s a second alcove at close proximity, directly across the way. The effect of this doubling is to unsettle the perfect





entirety of the first, as the doubling is in the same instance a splitting of the single item into two. This explains the resonance, either this or the woman who is sitting in the second alcove.

The woman in the second alcove hears the performance and stands up. She should not venture from the park, but the amplified strings of pretend guitar playing unsettles her, sending her hurrying across the wide green, away from the alcove and towards the very thing she should be avoiding – her home. You watch her head to that place – she’s unawares, all the while anticipating walking through her door in a movement that would transport her from outside to in, from anxiety to relief. When the time comes she opens the door into the communal hallway, then unlocks a second door that takes her to a narrow private staircase leading up to the top of the house. On entering the attic room she loses her flow and pauses. Her usual sense of being is troubled by a sudden and undermining vagueness. Somewhere between the stairway and the entrance to this room, the banal but comforting certainty of home is lost. She waits by the door. There is the table and its chairs, the bookcase and so on, in fact the room appears exorbitantly congested for somewhere that feels so empty. A few steps forward then she stops again, waiting right here, disorientated as she says to herself, ‘I was here, when he left. I was standing here when he left. I have to move. I can move and I’ll reorientate myself at the very centre of the room.’ In a series of deliberate steps she travels straight across diagonally and then around the furniture, followed by a determined move that again





encircles the space before she crosses to the opposite side where she waits, but as if she can't locate a centre, she goes again. With each performance of her repeated action she crosses the floor forming a large X with her path. After each journey the middle of the X is at a different spot in the room, every site indicated is equally misplaced, equally disorientating. She goes again.



In the end, the situation takes on a grave seriousness. She walks forward, pushes the attic window open and climbs up on to the sill. With one arm above her she grips the top of the window frame where it curves overhead to form a semicircular arch. The thumb of her other hand is on the inner edge of the frame. Her fingers splay across the brick-and-block wall inside the room. 'I like the solid brick width of this attic wall,' she says, 'I could mention only the everyday wall.' From the outside to in – a brick outer façade, an insulated cavity and an aggregate block inner surface lined with plaster. Multiple layers of emulsion paint cover the plaster, the uppermost a micro-fine vinyl matt skin meets the glabrous friction pads of her fingertips. With a gentle pressure, epidermal ridges and underlying tissue compress, tense against particles of paint that darken from exposure to this human life. 'I should be able to continue living here,' she says. 'I should live inside this structure as if I could only think of the arched window and this brick wall around me.' She repeats these words but can't make any of their meanings feel real. She could step back off the window ledge and into her home, but the solidity of this attic room is lost somewhere in the





insecurity of her mind. Looking ahead she now imagines a wide green. She could step off the edge and into it.

Across the wide green and there sits the pretender. You move closer, and in the event of apprehension, when you do look very carefully, the alcove, the bridge, the guitar, the window ledge, even his erection – it's all less stable than it seems.



There sits the pretender with words repeating in his mouth, covertly whispering about absence it seems, absence and unrequited love, monument and memorial, desire and disavowal. 'I've never understood,' he says, 'I've never understood the matter of reality.' He lies back on the bench, caressing the guitar, the amp silent, its battery long dead. It is now some time since he crossed the green and settled so conclusively into the stone alcove. He says, 'This alcove, it's a place I think, a man could live in here. It would be fair to say the room's a modest one, both small and semi-exposed, but I could live here and look out over the wide green and mention only these stones.'

