

# The Museum of Fog

## The Clientele

One Friday night, in late summer, I was walking the old canal;  
cars passed, open windows blaring hits by Madonna. Buddleias overhung the road

I left the towpath as the light began to fail and found myself  
in a pub car park. From its battered sign, I recognised the Fox  
and Hounds: I'd last visited two decades ago, before I'd left  
the town for good, a 16-year-old slumped over an illegal rum and  
d coke. A policeman had been striding towards the door and the  
landlady bundled me and my friends out of a window in the gents  
toilets, from which we nimbly landed on the canal towpath, and  
melted into the night, laughing

(Through the gate and past the bourn  
Meadowsweet and thick blackthorn  
There were birds high on the trail  
When I saw your face)

Inside, nothing had changed. The jukebox still boasted a 45 by  
Twinkle, thirty years after it had dropped out of the charts. Mock  
Tudor windows still faced the road and oak beams above blackened  
in a fug of smoke. No one was drinking there

A crowd didn't begin to gather until 9. Kids, not cool exactly,  
but somehow... leonine. I guessed from the posters on the walls  
they'd come to see a band, and soon they were lining past me, paying  
an entrance fee to a man in stonewashed denim and disappearing into  
a back room. The idea of a night drinking alone was unpleasant to me.  
The pub was now empty. I had nothing to lose, and I picked up my beer,  
paid my money and followed them in

(Very early once in May  
Voices outside called my name  
There were green leaves in your hair  
When I kissed your lips)

The room was cramped and dark, and during a momentary hush, a singer  
on the stage was introduced as The Phantom. He was wearing the kind of  
plastic mask sold in art shops, and a superhero's cape. To a round of  
applause, several other musicians formed a circle, amps turned in on  
each other like wagons on a prairie. I looked around me: the crowd was  
bathed in the red glow of the stage lights. For a moment, the buzz of  
amps filled the expectant quiet. Then, without a count-in, the band  
began to play

(The bell, the cup, the gown  
The falling tower falls down)

Almost immediately, I froze. The sound their instruments made was almost-human: my beer glass slithered through my fingers as I recognised it as my own 16-year-old laughter, escaping through a toilet window, retreating from a policeman, dragged back through the long track of years which had passed, and re-presented, re-lived in front of the audience. In its disembodied state, it was one of the most purely beautiful things I have ever heard—it briefly brought the past back to life, old hopes and innocence burst into sudden power. I was sweating, shaking in the dark room, tears welling in my eyes. But within seconds the laughter died and the hair on my arms stood up—I had the physical sensation of shapes evaporating away into the night outside

Slowly, the music took on a harsher, more abstract tenor, and in it I heard the faint seashore noises of the motorway, building into a long drone which slowly became overwhelming, roaring like a jet engine. To me, at that moment, it seemed to express our years of living with that motorway sound, years of it underscoring every day and night, every experience we'd lived through, cleansing it from our bodies and minds in a deafening catharsis

(Hollow boned, you'll waste away  
Searching through the forest glades  
For the green leaves in the hair  
And the lips that kiss)

I was shaking as the band rounded their set out with a wash of bells or wind chimes. As they left the stage to scattered applause, it occurred to me that the Phantom had not sung a note

He was pushing through the crowd towards the exit, hemmed in by acolytes. I tried to get near him but I couldn't. Dazzled by the sudden bright light in the room, my certainty drifted away; had the sounds I'd heard been exactly what I'd thought they were? I was in a difficult, neurotic state and perhaps there were memories welling up that I couldn't control. I felt suddenly depressed and tired, disgusted with my own numbness

(Hollow boned, you'll waste away  
Searching through the forest glades  
For the green leaves in the hair  
And the lips that kiss)

Kids were leaving, ignitions starting up outside; the Phantom had joined a carload, rolling on up the road towards the town and its only nightclub. The pub was closing down. I stood in the night and I wondered what had been taken from me