

# Into the light

A text by Nick London

I'm stood, looking down at the back of my arms and hands. As I turn them over in the flat, amber glow, I consider the number of years it's been since I was last bathed in street lighting. Heady memories of nights long passed come surging through my mind, as if each were triggered by the incoming, sodium charged photons. Looking up from my reverie, I am faced with a poster-sized photograph, trapped behind a layer of Perspex, showing a shop front with the shutter's half closed. I'm told that the picture was taken in the early morning, yet, under lights that prevent my eyes from rendering colour, the hour of day is hard to differentiate. Paper covers the glass doors of the store, obstructing a view of the interior. I ponder that the premises could be both open *and* closed, in day *and* night, existing, as it does before me, in a trapped, frozen state of duality. I don't know what became of this particular business, following its pandemic induced closure, so am forced to consider its fate – much like Schrödinger's cat – as existing in all states of possibility.

I was in prison during the pandemic, and for some years before and after it. I never saw the empty, apocalyptic high street, deserted motorways, and two-metre gaps in supermarket checkout queues. Other than some additional restrictions, my days of lockdown proceeded much as they had done before. I am therefore struck by an overwhelming sense of being in a museum; amidst the preserved relics of a time and place that existed outside of my own reality. I catch a glimpse of myself reflected in the Perspex, and for a moment become an actor in the scene. In this role I am a man out of time, installed in a history that was not my own, surrounded by the artefacts of a society to which I did not belong. It's possible that I'm being myopic, and the reality is that most people would feel the same about this particular moment in history. It could even be that, in those times, I was more a member of this society than I was at any other – all of us, being prisoners, of sorts, back then. Perhaps I am free to select either narrative, and that the freedom itself becomes salient in the choosing to hold multiple versions of reality in a suspended state.

Another piece shows two more images of closed shop premises. Here the light finds passage travelling along the surfaces, refracting down the thick edges and creating an impossible glow. The streetlights are enveloping the scene, a reminder that they have remained in the frame over decades of decline and renewal; steadfast in the civic function and metronomic timing, whilst all else beneath them staggers along to an erratic beat of the capitalist state. The images show a growing pile of letters – no doubt, bills, and court reminders – vying for position beyond the shop doors: unwanted news on a welcome mat. The rhythm may be erratic, but the obligatory beat pounds on and on.

In another image, the glass of a store front reflects closed premises opposite it, with an empty street between them. Once more I see my reflection, trapped in a space between the shops, and the road, and the poster, and the Perspex, and the impossible light. My thoughts shift to the view from my old cell window. Some mornings, when the sun

was rising in a misty summer sky, the yellow and orange glow would merge with the fence line, itself lit by the same kind of sodium lights I now stand beneath. For a few moments the skylit steel would dissolve into the sunrise, and I, reflected in my window, would stand within and beyond the apparatus of my containment. Like the owners of those shop premises, I would exist beyond the knowledge of any certainty, my hopes for the future tethered to countless variables of the present: time's weight and relevance felt, yet suspended, in this improbable moment; free from the grim solidity of reality set in stone.

The bills and demands from the shop floor are now cast in concrete before me.. The terror within those envelopes is now petrified, and the screaming demands within forever silenced. I think of all the dear John letters I've seen opened over the years, and wonder, had they been left unopened, would the relationship be both alive and dead? At what point is the future re-written? Here, for all posterity, hangs a moment of frozen eventualities: realities cast in a state of perpetual unknowns; a reprieve for hopes and dreams that would otherwise be shattered. In a final glance I note that the address window in one of the envelopes has been pressed as smooth as glass in the concrete rendering. I imagined that if I look hard enough I may see the recipients details, and from them I could know more: more of their plight; more of the society to which I must re-join; more of myself. I fight the futile urge to see what will remain forever occluded.

And then I move out, into the dizzying, technicolour daylight of the unknown.