

## Manhattan

A poem to be filmed

'Unreal city' –

T.S. Eliot, *The Wasteland*

'Only the city is real'

Lawrence Durrell, *The Alexandria Quartet*

### I

The morning is metal:

a spillage of mercury laces the river,  
the last lights of night slipped out to sea,  
borne away upon the Hudson's shoulder.  
A run-off of neon and pixel silver,  
traces of the city that will never settle.

On the island itself, the rattle of shutters rising,  
the single thread of a steel-woven siren,  
and deep in the village, a truck at the kerb  
swallowing the piles of dim-sum  
bags, cleared by six a.m. An undrawn curtain,  
a blind ascending; the eyes of the city, opening.

The wind comes like a sweeper,  
the jig-saw prints of night-walkers fade  
and the sun rises above the squat water towers,  
wooden relics of another age,  
as the morning light turns Manhattan's page  
and wakes the city's sleepers.

## II

The sun makes sundials of buildings,  
strips of shadow halving the streets  
and falling here, beside the sidewalk's flow, across a girl;  
using a window for mirror with her bags at her feet  
she dusts for fingerprints over her cheek  
and pinches to her lobes, one at a time, last night's earrings.

She is young but knows she needn't bother  
with rooms or walls – that these have long come down,  
worn thin with close living, the habits  
of others seen through sound;  
she knows private space is still shared ground,  
that we live apart and together, and that the crowd is our weather.

As does he, a slow salmon against the stream,  
his bare-foot shuffle and bovine eye  
bringing him to browse the trash can's debris,  
which he picks and sniffs, like the shopper who buys  
from the fresh fruit counter, just beside  
yet further from him than the vaguest dream.

## III

Midday, and the tide of money is all the way in,  
the dollar bill, the rung receipt, the stiletto's sharpened heel,  
Wall street's steady lunch-time stride,  
Manhattan is sitting to its favourite meal  
of profit and loss, of make and deal.  
At this hour, work is the tune and money the hymn.

On a roof on third, among a few plants and grasses,  
a *Radioshack* assistant unpacks his sub  
and is surprised for a second by both the sun and a bird,  
the small change of a sparrow dropped from above  
unlocking a memory of a place which he loved,  
where the sun lit the curve of a berry, not the haze of standing buses.

Seven floors below, in an underground gym,  
another of the city's engines is working full speed;  
thirty treadmill runners, sprinting abreast towards a bank  
of screens on which every sickness and every disease  
has its own advert, rounded with fastspeak and advice to heed.  
Midday, and the tide of money is all the way in.

#### IV

Five thirty, and with the shadows casting east  
and the world scrolling through Times Square  
the women in black make their chain on the library steps.  
Silent, their banners lay their grief bare,  
mourning not just the fallen in that country where  
fear and greed have unleashed the beast,

but also (and is this why the library?) the wounding of language –  
the words ransacked from the chest of a nation,  
their currency devalued with over-spending.  
Words on which promises were made and won,  
turned hollow on the ear, unfaithful on the tongue.  
The women in black make their stand, while a sandwich

board man passes, once more, the links of their chain,  
his board a sail drifting towards forty third  
written with the numbers of the recently slain.  
The light fades, and somewhere else a mother waits for word,  
hoping the attack and the wounding she heard,  
first on the news and then from friends, is not him, again.

V

Dusk and the city becomes all window,  
a 2D punch-card skyline of light.  
Marble-calved women hail taxis like Liberty,  
as their drivers cross seas to wish goodnight.  
And everyone is both where they are and they might  
be: in office and home, here and abroad, above and below.

The city is on the move, a hinge of an hour  
when the film between then and now is thinnest.  
Because everything and nothing is new.  
Built as much in memory as brick, the past  
is this city's cement; even its future can't last.  
The moment and forever is the city's only measure.

Every pair of lovers stacked in the towers  
Will lie down to bed within the arms of others.  
Each café, bookstore and new nail parlour  
is ghosted; by the deli, the brothel, the cobbler.  
A girl and boy kiss with lips beyond each other's.  
Such are the echoes in this shared city of hours.

## VI

Midnight and within the dark of late-  
night bars faces light up in the moon-glow of phones.  
Drink blurs the end of day and if you listen carefully  
beneath the conversation's flow and drone  
and the low hum of fear of being alone,  
that sound you can hear is a thousand hearts, wanting to break.

Outside and far to the edge of the island's blade,  
a single man and the east river run.  
Turning for home he looks north and is stopped  
by the skyline's double statement and question:  
Look, it asks, what have we done? And look, it says, what we have done.  
He pauses, then carries on. The FDR roars and the question fades.

Later still and the taxis shuttle the city's loom,  
carrying home the daters, the starers and the half awake.  
Others walk, the ache in their soles like a second heartbeat.  
A woman on a step turns in her sleep, still guarding what no-one will take.  
A door closes, a train passes, a glass of water gently shakes.  
The city embraces itself and waits for the morning, coming soon, coming soon.