

NO. 50: THE PROBLEM OF THE CITY

Antoni Jach



In the end, I think we just give up the city to the cars. We let them take over. We just give up the city - gracefully. The city wasn't ours to begin with.

On a grey day white smoke escapes from black chimneys, on a black day grey smoke is puffed out, on a white day, on a black day...

The funny thing is no one loves the city any more. The pedestrians jostle each other in the lunchtime crowds, the newspaper sellers harass the crowds, the crowds snap back.

On a windy day there is all sort of plaster dust that makes contact with your contacts while on a misty day your glasses are so misted over that you cannot see the city any more. It takes an enormous effort to see the city anyway. Just when you are standing in the middle of it and you think you've got a fix on it - it disappears. You're left with just the shell of a city - the outer rim, bleached of colour. You're left with egg all over your perfectly porcelain face.

If you talk to anyone you cannot hear them speak - such is the nature of the noise in the city... I think we just give up - we let the cars on the footpaths as well. This will make it safer for all of us. They can spread out. They will have more room. They won't feel so jostled or so hemmed in. They will be at peace, to roam and graze at will.

At least when the sun comes out the birds can sing, that is, if there are any birds left. If they have not all been squashed into the mud of the building site or covered over under tons of concrete, steel and glass. If they have not been trampled under the hoofs of wild automobiles that roam in herds.

There is another building going up over there, and another one going up over here. In fact, right where you're standing to view this construction site, they're about to put a building up. The plans are with the city council at the moment. That building over there is for people while that one beside it is for cars; or maybe it's the other way round - maybe the tall one over there is for cars. Let's build a multi-storey car park right where you are seated. This nineteenth-century arcade is simply an inefficient use of space. We need a place where the cars can congregate together, and have a jolly good time.

When you walk around the city you get the feeling that the people are in slow motion - but the buildings are growing up awfully fast, eating up the available airscape at an enormous rate. And as for the

automobiles, well, they're either driving themselves around or else they're out to lunch - slurping and burping their way through vast amounts of vintage oxygen.

On days when there is a heavy winter shower preceded by a hurtling wind that shakes the tin elm trees rattling their leaves like old empty cans on a washing line then it seems as if the city can be clean again. It seems that way - but not for long. The trees will tell you a different story; if they can speak at all - with their arms and legs pinned by concrete and nourished by the excreta of four-wheeled, two-eyed, one-mouthed grazing machines.

When springtime comes, as we all know, it brings on the shearing. In the city it brings on a rash of building permits and you choke on mortar dust as nineteenth-century buildings are shaved to within an inch of their lives, leaving only their facades standing, bolstered up by iron supports. The shearers wear hard hats. But they're not making the money. The ones that make the money wear no hats at all. The ones that make the money have bankers for friends and go out to lunch while their cars are gobbling up the gardens of the city.

There is a certain melancholy in the cafes of the city as if all the proprietors want to be back in Trieste or Naples. The town planners wish to arrest this nineteenth-century mood and thrust the city into the twenty-first century by turning the cafes of the city into rest rooms for cars. Two cars per cafe is the latest law. Every office building in the city can apply for a cafe-bar machine instead.

The first cafes to be 'renovated' will be used for the cars of the town planners, followed by the cars of the councillors and the mayor, then the cars of the state and federal politicians.

Our roads will be forever glorious. There will be nowhere much to go, but what the heck, you just drive up and down looking at the view: skyscraper, bridge, oil refinery, sewerage farm. What we need is a new ring road, and a new toll road while you're at it. Make it two cups of bitumen, rather than one; spoonful of sugar for my pretty Fiat sitting over here.

The major problem with the city according to the council is the lack of bitumen. This problem is being addressed as we speak. Humans can walk on grass and dirt but cars need bitumen to saunter on.

Strangely it is only the humans who are suffocating as we walk around the city. The newer buildings are doing just fine, thank you very much for asking. The air's not fit to breathe outside the buildings while inside the air-conditioning has broken down, again. Which leaves us, where? Probably dead within five years.

The cars are doing just fine too, thank you very much for asking. You see all of that lovely clean air is wasted on them. They grow radiant with just a splash of CO2 deodoriser.

Cars are specially designed - they are impervious to their own excrement. It's only humans who can't eat it.

The survival of the fittest, as Darwin told us way back when, means that cars have a greater chance of survival - mutating those fins, adapting their grills, flushing out their radiators, whereas humans...

On extremely hot carbon dioxide days the bitumen sticks to your feet. Bitumen is made from tar and tar is made from oil which is the earth's phlegm.

And tar is what stays in the lungs long after you sit back after a good meal, light up a cigarette and relax. Light up to forget about...forget about, what? Why, the problems of the city - 50 of them.

If we are good girls and boys and we give over the city to YOU CARS, then one problem of the city is solved. YOU CARS can do what you like with the city. We will continue to massage the arteries of the city with highways, with freeways, with tollways. After the massage, a healthy city will spring back to glorious and abundant life! Stop whingeing, now. Let the cities have their cars!

The car springs out of the tyranny of the individual: the city springs out of the desire to congregate; cars are not immune to this desire. Tar springs out of the fountain of the earth. Ta-ta, Earth!

Maybe if we, one, two, three blow, the city will all fall down. All the skyscrapers will fall down on the highways of the city leaving only those buildings that are three to four human heights tall.

But then Our City stands for Progress and who are we to get in the way of Progress for the purely selfish consideration of being able to breathe. It's just not on! If you stand in the way of Progress you will be

bitumanned and bituwomanned over. You will be mulched into the good earth to become fertiliser for the genetically modified crops of iron and steel rods bursting through the earth's scalp. Smoke exhaust gets in my eyes... Smoke is going to my head, going through my head...coming out my ears.



The rulers who make the laws concerning the city and the car all drive to work in the morning - it's as simple as that. You do not bite the hand that feeds you; that feeds you carbon dioxide every time you walk around the city looking for a place to love. You do not like the hand that feeds you? Your city disappoints you. How more unlovely can it become?

Have you noticed how many crazy people there are in the city lately? I'm not talking about the vagrants, I'm talking about the ones in suits. Their eyes roll in their faces like winter ice-skaters circling the rink. They are discussing profit margins over a business lunch. At the end of the day they slip into their cars and slurp out home to the outer suburbs. Their cars were busily gobbling up the city while the business-types were out to lunch.

THOSE THINGS are eating the city. Such appetites! They're gnawing away at the arteries, salivating over the bones... I can't believe... I can't imagine THOSE THINGS are ever going away to slink away peacefully and give the city back over to the foot-walkers. THOSE THINGS are making themselves mobile.

You remember how we used to see the city as a magical candy-box that on opening played music? Far away in the distance, it glowed, like lights on a Christmas tree, first on, then off. And you in your pink party dress. You looking divine, as always. Are you going to tell me that the magical glowing city has finally been extinguished, asphyxiated?

You remember how we used to draw the city as a heart, with arteries going everywhere, everyone interconnected? Well, now it's more of a valve - letting healthy people in, and letting dying people out.

There must be some reason to explain why people are dropping dead of disappointment. Just look up the latest statistics. Cancer, heart attack, disappointment... The city's gonna get you, gonna get you...get me too.

Have you noticed how putrid the city has become? The city stains...

We've decorated the city in concrete now. The concrete multi-storey car parks are looking just dandy! Mighty fine colour grey. Is there a doctor within the four walls of the city? Let's borrow a stethoscope and take a heartbeat. Let's take a microscope and look at the concrete veins while we're at it... Another tollway on the way...for whom the toll bells?

There is a parking problem in the city: what parking problem? There is a human problem in the city. Just get all those damn humans out of the way. Who needs THEM anyway? Mere extras on the set.

Cars are feeling at home amongst the iron, concrete and glass of the city, making themselves comfortable, snuggling up to fire hydrants, making themselves mobile...

Have you noticed how much scaffolding is being used in the city at the moment? It's like cancer - taking over...multiplication of aberrant cells. If you take one step too many you'll be scaffolded in. The city can be our cemetery. We don't even have to move out. Just cover us over on the spot, as we lose our breath, and fall over, and fall under...enfolded peacefully...our arms crossed over our chests.

Cars kill the city through loving overmuch: the erotic embrace is full of transmission oil.

The city needs mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. Volunteers, with a clean set of lungs, please step forward this way.

Who then will be upset when the age of the city is over? We should just give up the city to the cars, and the tollways and the fly-overs and the exit off-ramps. Let them take over. We could pull all the humans out quickly - like a military operation, helicopters on the roof - and leave the cars to fornicate noisily in underground parking lots with the steady drip of faulty air-conditioning systems leaking corrosive fluids all over them.

We could leave the city for its original inhabitants. We could say we took your land away, now we are returning it. Look how we have covered your hills with mighty fine grey concrete and black bitumen, dammed up your river and torn out your trees. We could say we do not need the city any more. It's too dirty for us to live in. Look how we have unmade your river. We do not belong here. We will return to Europe, to Asia, to the Americas by the first available Boeings and Airbuses. Pity about the mess, but that's Progress!

We won't have a party when we leave, as we did to celebrate our bicentennial of destruction. As a farewell present we will send in the bulldozers to level the city. We will tear up the concrete and the bitumen. We will leave you with an orchestra of scars...a white-style tribal scarring of the land.

From up above, from 2,000 feet in a helicopter, you can see how the city's face is pock-marked with tar.

The didgeridoo echoes deep within the air-conditioning system of the central city's nervous system.

We cannot leave the land as we find it. There is a desire to destroy - everything. We crawled out of our reptile skins but the reptile still remains. Everything we breathe upon we turn to bitumen.

We turn the air to soot. Angels of revenge roller-skate in the underground parking lots with Walkmans turned up real loud. Oil stains on the concrete, blood on the pavement.

What happened to our inheritance? We inherit other people's recycled breath, other people's car exhaust. Our covenant is with the Palace of Fumes, our Hades is made up of sulphur, carbon and dioxide.

No longer the final death of the Apocalypse - by fire - but now a much more modern solution - death by suffocation.

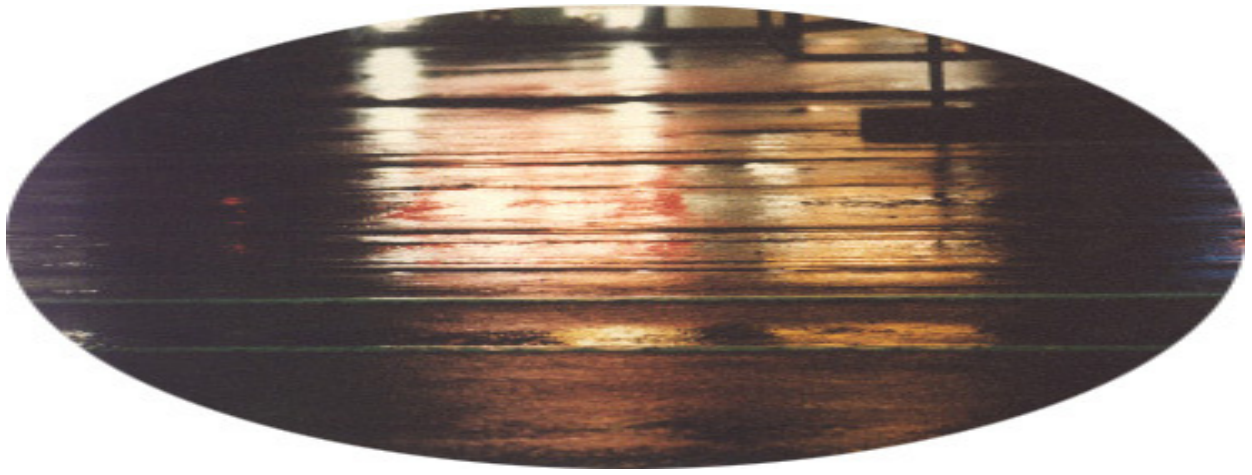
We inherit the fumes - and this is what we leave to our children. See that brown pall of muck and gunk hanging over the city - that is your inheritance. Try breathing that!

We can abandon the city - we can say we have failed with the city. We can give it up, walk away.

The long white road leads us out - we can walk out, if we can still breathe. Pass the artificial respirator.

The clean air eludes us - but then, we are creatures of the filth, creatures by nature, of theft. We'll just leave all that bitumen behind. Let the weeds crack through the surface. Let the earth regain its composure.

There are fifty ways to walk away from the city.



Antoni Jach's most recent novel is The Layers of the City (Sceptre) which was shortlisted for the fiction section of The Age Book of the Year Award in 1999. It will be published in Turkey in 2001 by Kultur Publishers of Ankara.

TEXT Special Issue Website

No 1 April 2000

Creative Nonfiction, edited by Donna Lee Brien & Nigel Krauth

<http://www.gu.edu.au/school/art/text/speciss>

General Editors: Nigel Krauth & Tess Brady

Text@mailbox.gu.edu.au