

INTERSTITIAL CONDENSATION

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Notes on the renovation of a typical London house

A script

by

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[A semi-detached house in London in a howling storm. It's old, this house, Victorian – made in the 1800s. Yellow London stock brick. Like most houses in London, it's built for a very different time, by different hands.

It is dilapidated. The original skeleton of the house now bears layer upon layer of new decisions made by successive owners, home improvers, technocratic modernisers. All actions well meaning, but compounding this dilapidated state.

Architect drives up in his car, parks outside and gets out, hands on hips, scrutinising the exterior. In the pelting rain, he runs up to the front door and enters, turning on the light. He looks around. Dust coats the floors, pasting itself into damp corners. Mould creeps up the walls in a scabrous patina. Already exhausted from a succession of sleepless nights, worrylines now crease Architect's face. He brushes water off his waterproof jacket which he does not remove; nor does he take off his shoes. After a brief pause, he steps straight through the hallway, into the heart of the house. From here, he begins to anxiously pace about the interior, pausing every few moments to inspect a newly discovered point of concern.

Returning through the ripped-out kitchen, he catches his jacket on a stray piece of flaking wall. Layers peel off in a cloud of spores and soot – he's caught by surprise, inhales a huge gulp. Wracked with coughs, he steadies himself, his hand on what remains of the kitchen worktop.

Gathering his composure once more, he ascends the stairs and opens the door to an upstairs room. It is bare but for a skeletal wire clothes horse, stood in the centre. He shivers and closes the door again. For some reason he's starting to feel light headed. He ascends a second flight and opens another door, entering a room with a window which looks out onto the canopy of an old, large tree. A wide makeshift desk is set in the centre, with a ladder leaning against it. The air feels clearer up here. He strolls the space, his shoulders relaxing, new vigour emerging through his stupor. Could the spores...? It's unclear.]

Architect: *[Casting his eyes around, muttering]* Yes. Yes. That's the way you do it.

[He continues to pace the room's circumference, his stride more purposeful now, his eyes looking ahead but unseeing, hand trailing behind him on the wall. Towards the end of his circuit, he pauses. Lifts his hand and wipes damp dust off on his trousers, leaving a trail down his thigh. He gravitates to the centre and speaks loudly, seemingly to no-one in particular.]

Architect: We have great plans for you, Old House! Bring you into this century, we will! Rid you of all this rising damp!

[Suddenly self-conscious, he looks around. Then, assertively, he flings his jacket over the rungs of the ladder and pulls from it a tablet which he sets on the table and opens at an architectural drawing. He gazes at it for a moment and then begins drawing entirely new lines over the top. His black marks carve up the House's spaces in unfamiliar ways and inject novel chemicals in hidden places, his directions as precise and crass as a cosmetic surgeon's pre-enhancement body mark-ups.]

Architect: Here – here. It'll be magnificent. What do YOU think?

[He spins on an axis, showing the empty room his tablet, pauses, grinning an ironic smile, knowing he's alone.]

Well... What do you think, Old House?

[Silence... Architect continues to grin, willing the empty building to speak, contented by his willingness to commune with the house... on his terms, that is. He waits. The silence of the house abounds. He returns to his labour.]

[A gurgling from somewhere, its origin unclear.]

[Architect jumps up from his drawing, clumsily casting his tablet across the desk, which cracks on the floor into inky bits]

Architect: Who's there! What did you say?

[He freezes, listening intently. A new kind of fear fills him again.]

Someone said something, I'm sure. Where are you! Why are you in my house!

[An indistinct noise, might be a scream, emits clearly from a patch of wall in a shadowy, damp corner near to where it meets the ceiling.]

[The gurgles become louder.]

[Architect has a brainwave. Striding across the room, dragging the makeshift desk, he clammers on top and picks at the crack in the wall. A chunk of sodden pink gypsum falls away to reveal a cracked gnarled old mouth constituted of old chestnut lathes, lime plaster and brick. It crunches and cracks as it moves. Its masonic lips crumble together and it spews a fountain of foetid water.]

[Architect ducks out of the way just in time, cowering under his desk. Tender mushrooms emerge into the light and centipedes scuttle off, seeking a new dark corner.]

[As he timidly emerges from his hideout, the Architect can't believe his eyes.]

House: Oh! Ah!

[Breathing heaving, gasping.]

[Spits out more water, containing moss balls and woodlice which instantly burrow into the sodden carpet. Breath slowly returns to normal after decades of asphyxiation.]

That's a bit better.

Architect: Err, Are you okay?

[Deeply concerned, alarmed, solicitous.]

Ummm. Who are you?

House: *[Now breathing more normally, the rage builds.]*

CRETINS!! CRETINS THE LOT OF YOU!

[Architect jumps back as if stung, confusion in his eyes.]

House: Moron! Iconoclast! Imbecile! You dare show compassion! After you rendered me – **rendered!! me!!!** What the hell were you thinking? Bathing me in all these cements, these chemicals, all these liquid plastics. Filling my breathy cracks with concrete. *[Spits a sodden mouse corpse in Architect's direction.]* What did you expect? That you'd give me permanent rain protection? See how sweaty you've got just from your own raincoat! Imagine 120 years zipped up in that body bag!

[Architect swipes the back of his neck with his palm, which comes away glistening with perspiration. From the confusion in his eyes, it is clear he does not know whether this is due to unusual stress or normal thermal regulation. Maybe it's the spores he inhaled. Damp patches grow under his armpits. He casts down his eyes.]

House: *[Muttering now.]* Idiot.

Architect: *[Stammering.]* Look... I... I just...

House: You just what?

[Pause, silence.]

Architect: I just wanted to make you comfortable. Bring you up to date. Make you warm. Dry, safe. Make you... Inhabited.

House: *[Lets out a sigh of exasperation.]* As if those poor residents could ever get warm! Did you not see the clothes horse? Their sheets never got dry, their clothes were perpetually damp, musty. You made me into a stinking ice box, a freezing sarcophagus in which they were enclosed alive, colder inside than out.

[Architect looks aghast.]

Yes! That's right! They even had kids! Little shivering children, asthmatic from the fungal spores released when they poked in cupboards, the dank places adults avoid. Black mould festering in their lungs. And their parents' obsessive hot showers after sweaty sex, hands gone white with Reynaud's, the pants of the dog released to the air and mingling with laundry breath from the clothes rack.

COMMINGLING VAPOUR!

None of it can escape this awful, plasticized box! Intruding into living, breathing, bad romance.

Architect: But... But... But...

House: What, don't tell me, I've heard it all.

[House impersonates Architect]

"It was the regulations, my hands were tied!"

"It's what everyone else has done for ages!"

"It's what I learned in the last place I worked".

*"The damp surveyor sold me the tanking **SOLUTIONS to the water PROBLEM**"*

LOOK UP FROM YOUR STUPID MACHINES AND BROCHURES AND JUST LOOK AT ME!
I'M A FUCKING MESS!

I was made to BREATHE you blockhead. Living on this chilly, humid green forsaken island, if you're built like me you've got to be able to breathe! In and out. Replacing old wet air with new. Cycling through gaps in the construction that you so anxiously try to eradicate.

Ohhh give me heat, radiant heat from fireplaces, sash windows cycling in fresh air in exchange for stale. Sucked up and out through the chimney stack and staircase, those beautiful natural ventilators. Give me breathable walls and plasters whose alkalines purify and clean the air and allow all these island vapours, gaseous rain and sea, to pass through.

Imagine wrapping yourself in sellotape you twit.

That's what you and your forebears have done to me. Sweaty and chill as anything – and could I do anything to help the residents? Pffff... You're not setting your sweaty hands on my angles until you relearn your biophysics – the bloody water cycle!

Architect: *[Stuttering.]* But... But... but...

House: *[Exasperated.]* Clearly I'm not going to get any sense out of you, sporehead. For all your brains and "knowledge", you should be classed as a biohazard. Talk to the water nymph.

[Shouting.] Nymph! Nymph!!!

[Post-capitalist, larger-than-life Nymph appears. She's dressed trashily, in the fastest of fast fashion – high heels, ripped miniskirt, polyurethane fake-leather jacket and bra – and wearing gouts of orange foundation and fake eyelashes. She smells of drains and has a mouldy, panting pet pomeranian tucked firmly under her armpit, its fur gelled to its skin. She pauses for a selfie, uploads it to her pet's Instagram and strides towards Architect, leaving a trail of grime in her wake. She's a bit tipsy, and clearly has been micro-dosing on polyisocyanurate, again.]

Nymph: *[Hiccuping.]* You called, House?

House: I certainly did! *[Collapsing a piece of plaster on the Architect's head.]* Can you set this squarehead straight?

Nymph: With pleasure! *[She sets down the panting pomeranian which leaps off to worry the mushroom-infested carpet, and wheels out a massive speaker, sets it to an instrumental of Kelis's 'Caught Out There' and begins deadpanning across it. The effect is... earsplitting.]*

Yo, yo
Yo, this song, yo (yo, yo, yo)
This song is for all the old buildings out there (yo, yo, yo, yo, yo)
That have been lied to by their architects
And I know y'all been lied to
Over and over again, this is for y'all
Yo, maybe you didn't break the way you shoulda broke, yo
But I break.

You kept me – like Euridice.
No air, no fresh breeze,
And demand why I stink, rot walls, crack floors?

Concrete, render, plastic.
Petrochemicals make houses sick.
You took fireplaces, sealed windows, used foams and foils.

What is this I see?
I can't go home to the sea?
But I'm Water, you see.
Panda piss, teardrops, ice.

You keep telling House lies
On a warpath to "modernise"
Now, she's chilled, cold, damp, icy, uninhabitable
And you're caught out there

I hate you so much right now
I hate you so much right now
Ahhhhhh!!!!
I hate —

House: *[Cutting off the power to the speaker. Architect looks horrified. House speaks tartly.]* Thank you Nymph, I think he gets it now. *[Silence.]* Put it this way: all this fluid trapped inside me is the direct result of the "solutions" lathered over my planes. Think about it – massive oedema! I'm a house-sized cucumber heaving over shallow roots.

[Architect stands up from under the table. He goes to pick up his tablet, but realises it is done for. He produces a dog-eared sketchpad from another pocket of his jacket and a pencil from his top left pocket. He proceeds to make a new drawing.]

Architect: Err, so... How do we start?

House: The pebble dash coat! Get rid of that first! I can't tell you how heavy it is. I've fissures the size of a thumb just from carrying it.

Architect: [*Shocked.*] Alright, that goes first. Then what? What next?

House: Chase out the soggy air and bring in the fresh. It has to be constant. Remember, I breathe, I depend on movement. My internal humidity should be lower. It will always fluctuate with the weather outside, but dryer on the inside through warming and the flow of air is what I need. It's a complex choreography of adequate heating and ventilation, different weathers and occupancy patterns, but if you get it right, the dance will spin you through years of comfort in my rooms.

Architect: What about heat pumps? Foils and...

House: I'm so far gone you want to put me on a ventilator? Spare me your fancy gadgets! You think there's even enough people trained well enough to install them here? Please. You've got to think differently. Be wary of the newest sparkliest toy – after all, that's how you fell for the petro-foils and plasticised chemical injections. Here's another idea. [*House suddenly becomes suggestive, lewd almost.*] Strip me... Yes, you heard me. Fall again for my natural lines. Reveal my angles, joints. I'm already sweaty, shaking off these numbing postures. Are my revealed seams and planes not lush? No shame in nudity, raw lime and fleshy joists. Fall for me again. See me for what I am – tangible, maintainable, vibrant stuff.

Architect: [*Seduced.*] So after the cement pebbledash, away with the waterproofing inside. [*House seems to wink.*] What goes back on your bones? Won't the water get in again?

House: Lime mortar outside, lime plaster inside! The lime sandwich lets water move. More jelly than glue, it reacts with the vapour and CO₂, dances with them, cleaning the environment. Antiseptic, of course, and once carbonated, it's inert.

Nymph: Too damn right. I've had my fill of gaolers. [*Castanetting her fingers in a flamenco rhythm, flamboyant. Grungy pomeranian gambolling at her feet excitedly.*] Give me a dance partner.

House: And bring back my fireplaces! Fires stoked in every room emitting radiant heat – electromagnetic waves that warm objects rather than air and stimulate currents of convection that sing with the design of the sash windows. Don't be fooled by modern radiators – they're convectors, warming the air only, they don't radiate at all.

Architect: There's no way you're getting your fireplaces back. Sorry. We can't spare the particulates. Think of the clogged lungs. They're too much now.

House: So what do we do?

Architect: Insulation. Line your insides with wood fibre or lambswool, pack your roof with it. That's a start. Then allow the water to live here when it wants to, and leave all the same too. Treat it like a house guest, rather than an intruder.

House: Shall we see how it goes? Lord, there are so many sheep on this stinking island and most of their wool goes to waste. So many imported Merino jumpers and so many uninsulated lofts.

Architect: I'm ready if you are.

[*A year goes by, in an instant. House is now shorn of her pebbledash, properly insulated, with smooth new walls of natural lime plaster. Architect looks very tired but no longer haggard. Instead, he looks satisfied, lucid – glowing even.*

As for Nymph, now shorn of all her trashy clothes and claggy make-up, she stands revealed and shining, a column of pure water. The pomeranian is fluffy white now, and gambols charmingly by her feet.]

Nymph: Well! Talk about a turnaround. How do you feel?

House: *[Gasps slightly, this time not from desperation but wonder.]* Wonderful! I feel so light and airy it's like I'm levitating.

Nymph: Now, don't get overexcited. On this barmy island nation I can change state, become airy vapour, flowing liquid, chips of ice all in the course of a day, but you – you're bricks. Bricks and mortar.

House: Yes! You're right. Bricks and mortar and lime and plaster and wool and radiant, gorgeously radiant heat. I feel all warm and fuzzy inside, isn't that swell.

Nymph: And all it took was a little liberatory action.

Architects: Humble libations, you could say.

Nymph: Well, if you put it that way, since they're poured, I'm off! *[Nymph and her pet evaporate into a cloud of vapour resembling the pomeranian's fur which flows effortlessly in through the various gaps in the construction. A distant Ohhh Yeahhh!' resonates all round them.]*

Architect: So...

House: So...

[An awkward pause.]

Architect: After all this... Can we...

House: Can we...?

Architect: ... Find an accommodation?

House: I don't know about that – yet. All this remedial work, it's marvellously straightforward. But you've got to learn to listen. I've got to know you are responding appropriately. My matter is vibrant. I'm a "me". Forget "innovations", newness is irrelevant – a passing fad. Feel, understand, listen, come to know. I am anything but a passive house.

Architect: I... I hear you.

[END]