

**Contribution to a Book in a Day – Project initiative by Brian Lewis (inspired by visit to the Sir John Soane Museum, Lincoln’s Inn Fields)**

Walking along narrow corridors between artefacts and stone, more stone, the smell of ancient stone. The man – a bust – looking across a chasm at the naked figure of another man, figleaf in place. Looking up, looking down, looking around – lost, confused, trying to locate a small space, somewhere to hide, to feel free from the claustrophobia of too many things, too many possessions, almost too much history. Wandering into a room, dark, dim, with a painted ceiling reflected in mirrors, reflecting people wandering, looking, searching, trying to know more, see more, feel more. Why did they come here? To learn? To escape? To know a small something of a man from the past. An architect, the portrait with a chain round his neck. Did he think a lot of himself? There’s a complacent look. Was he wearing a wig? Was he vain? A glove on one hand. The facial expression – a mixture of weariness and yes, complacency. Across the other side of the room, a portrait of Mrs Soane, a bit meek. Dog on lap. Was this her pet? Was she loved by her husband? Was he too interested in other things – his collections, his work? *The Rake’s Progress*: a morality tale. All those cameo heads, small portraits, so many profiles of faces – so many people in the world, so many thoughts and emotions. Sir John Soane. Entertaining Mr Sloane – an extra ‘l’ – another generation – a playwright. Perhaps Mr Soane could be entertaining Mr Sloane – the cups and saucers and plates in the basement await.

**The Yellow Room: a Fantasy** *(with homage to TS Eliot)*

There’s a sadness in the Yellow Room, despite the radiant sun-blasted decoration. This was Mrs Soane’s empire, her favourite room, the one in which she entertained. Especially when her husband was away. In her diary there’s an entry: “Mr Soane out of town...had a dance.” She loved frivolity, craved the company of friends and family, but being married to a famous architect had its restrictions. She knew she had a role to play (it came with the dowry) and when Sir John was at home, she felt her confidence diminish, her pleasures squashed by the force of his personality, his demands, his obsessions.

Oh yes, she admired his talents and was proud to show guests their art collection, opening up the wall cabinets to expose paintings and prints, architectural designs, examples of her husband’s achievements. She was happy to be a gracious hostess.

*In the room the women come and go  
Talking of Michelangelo*

But the house was sometimes too busy, too frenetic, there were too many people pounding up and down the stairs: the apprentices, the draughtsmen, painters and politicians. And then the workmen, the men heaving heavy pieces of stone, scuffing the paintwork, bringing an outside earthiness of sweated labour into the sanctuary of her home.

Was it her home? Too often she felt excluded, an irrelevance. She was beginning to resent the honours heaped upon her husband. It was all right when there were parties, when she could swirl and sweep her dignity through the yellow room; when she could extend her fashionably dressed arm to young men of wealth and breeding. She liked

the attention, she liked to feel important, she liked the status that came with her marriage to an accomplished architect.

But she knew that underneath his flamboyant hauteur, Sir John was conscious of his humble origins, his inability to dance. Which is why he forbade such activity in his presence. Eliza knew she made him feel inadequate, an emotion that was also banned from the house. So she had to wait for her husband to go away before she could host the parties she enjoyed. This particular evening he was giving a lecture in Paris. As soon as she knew his plans, she sent out the invitations, engaged the musicians, rallied the servants and prepared to celebrate.

*Oh do not ask, what is it?  
Let us go and make our visit.*

The occasion took place at No 12 Lincoln's Inn Fields, a convivial social gathering in the first floor drawing rooms. Her cousin Jane sang Schumann's lieder, Florence recited a poem, Mr Hogarth sketched the guests. Eliza enjoyed the artist's company and although she pretended to be shocked by his sordid tales of London's low life, he always made her feel alive. He danced well too she noted.

She'd started inviting an American poet called Mr Elliot who had an acerbic turn of phrase. Like her husband he was fond of quoting from the classics. Too clever for his own good, she always thought – but she admired his writing.

Mr Turner popped in with another boat picture - Admiral van Tromp's barge this time. Where should they put it - above the fireplace maybe. William was a generous and talented friend. It was he who insisted that the walls should be yellow. And don't forget to get curtains and upholstery to match, he quipped. She remembered his admonition when she said she'd prefer a calmer colour. But yellow is so fashionable, he whispered. And how could she reject the advice of a friend.

In the end she liked the brightness; the room cheered her up in moments of gloom and despair.

*I have seen the eternal Footman hold my coat, and snicker,  
And in short, I was afraid*

The guests this evening were mostly old friends but a couple of recent acquaintances had been admitted to her inner sanctum. She recalled overhearing their conversation, huddled in the corner, mocking her husband as an upstart, a parvenu, a man who had 'done well' but lacked substance, lacked class, lacked style. They would not be invited again.

It was a good thing Mr Soane was away. He would talk so pompously about his work and never seemed to notice the insincerity of his audience, the inherent hypocrisy of their paeans of praise.

At such moments he never noticed her at all.

*I should have been a pair of ragged claws*

*Scuttling across the floors of silent seas*

When the guests had gone Eliza looked out of the window at the open space beyond the railings. It was dark and rather foreboding. No moonlight tonight. The gas lamps glimmered and the sound of hooves echoed in the square as the carriages went home, leaving her to reflect on the increasing emptiness of her life.

I hate the collection, the intrusion of ancient artefacts into a house which should be a hearth, a home. Its natural sense of space is ruined by the endless invasion of busts and statues and urns and gargoyles, bits of stone, bits of wood – all the architectural flotsam and jetsam my husband brings to the house. He likes living in a museum. I escape to my yellow room.

She turned from the window and walked over to the Danby painting – a scene from ‘The Merchant of Venice’, showing lovers in the moonlight. I yearn for romance, she thought, the love John and I had when first we married. Before he became so driven. Before success went to his head. Before I started to feel alone and irrelevant.

Lorenzo and Jessica in Belmont. What a romantic story, say the guests. Such a suitable picture to have on your wall. Mrs Soane and her husband have such a happy marriage.

But there’s a tension underlying the scene – Lorenzo and Jessica use classical references to question the potency of their love. “In such a night as this”, goes the Shakespearean refrain. Despite their playfulness, there are overtones of tragedy in the lovers’ dialogue.

And there’s a tension in the Yellow Room, despite the vibrant sun-soaked tones. There are dreams. There is desire. And there is duty.

*That is not it at all,  
That is not what I meant, at all*

Mrs Soane walked over to the portrait of her beloved sons. George, the younger, with an open expression on his face, his arm thrown nonchalantly around the shoulders of his elder brother whose posture is reticent, whose eyes are averted. John Junior already knew he would disappoint his father. He did not want to be an architect, he resented the pressure, he wanted freedom. Like his mother, he dreamed of other goals, other ambitions. John’s death left a gaping hole in his mother’s heart. She missed his sensitivity, his artistic temperament, the closeness of the first-born.

George on the other hand was a devious child. Always alert and watchful, he bided his time, eventually rebelling against the constraints of the family, ridiculing his father in print, publicly asserting his independence. It was unnecessarily cruel, she thought. And it was not the way to handle his father. Sir John expected obedience, from his children, his assistants, his servants – and of course from his wife. She was good at dissembling.

*There will be time, there will be time  
To prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet*

There was a bark and a small brown bundle leaped off the yellow upholstery. Fanny was awake.

Eliza bent down to stroke her dog and she was overcome by an overwhelming sense of peace. However much Mr Soane wants to control me, he cannot control my thoughts. Or who shall receive my love.

How many times have I sat with Fanny on my knee, bored by my husband's tedious expositions on art and culture, stroking her silky fur, listening to the soft panting of my canine friend, knowing that her devotion to me far outweighs the lack of affection by humans in this house. Fanny doesn't need to be admired. Fanny couldn't care a hoot about whether the newly-arrived sarcophagus is from Egypt or Babylon. As long as Fanny is alive, she gives me courage, she gives me love. When she dies, I will make sure she has a sarcophagus of her own, a stone-carved tribute that will in years to come be as valued and admired as the other objects in my husband's collection.

A peal of laughter rang out in the Yellow Room as in her mind's eye Eliza designed the tomb, a grand, overly-ornate objet d'art. She would commission the finest mason of the time. She would insist on the best – for her dog. Classical antiquities be damned, Fanny's memorial would become the highlight of the Sir John Soane Museum. Visitors would marvel, newspapers would comment, scholars and academicians of the future would debate its origin.

And as for the headstone. Eliza glanced at the painting of Jessica and Lorenzo in the moonlight. Shakespeare. She thought for a moment, and then laughed again. Of course, Hamlet - the grave-digger scene.

'Alas, poor Fanny'. That would do.

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