

## Breakfast Strip Show

by Richard Bilkey

The Oxford Tavern hides from the morning like a boy  
masturbating under the covers.  
Old men sit hunched,  
alone, against reproachful fingers  
of carceral sunlight that penetrate  
this refuge of weary ill repute.  
Heads bowed in humble reverence,  
furtive eyes devour topless barmaids  
from under weighted eyebrows, like starved dogs  
that slink for scraps from tables not their own.

Jobless workers slide  
into the half dark seeking manhood  
like junkies in pursuit of universal truth.  
They pose as kings and call the waitress 'princess'  
as she serves them drinks outside the shelter of her bar.  
One man blows smoke which, like a ghost  
of his desire, cups her breasts and curls  
in gentle turbulence around her neck.  
He sucks the dregs of power from their connection,  
like the last drag on the marrow of his fag.  
But his eyes betray the fantasy of his position;  
a guilty flash  
towards the watchful bouncer by the door.

I watch these men and sip my beer and fight,  
my impulse to return the barmaid's nipples gaze.  
And when she comes to clear my glass I  
don't know where to look. But for a moment  
I catch her eye, the eye  
that's known more of men than men know of her -  
the broken and the breaking  
and those who would deny it's just a matter of time.