

FEATURES

our time is almost up and so, having noted how
this fiery rebel's thick brows frame eyes still
smouldering

let's move on now to an aristocrat
his noble nose proudly flaring its glory
or listen to this girl's mischievous lips
twitching once more with some bewitching story

and yes Sir, of course hands too can tell a tale,
lying there wary on the arm of some chair
or knee, or lap, with fingers seemingly at odds
with one another or quivering motionless
vibrating like little birds with a first urge to fly

then here, you're right, a peaceful aura enfolds
the whole, transmits that fabled wisdom of the old –
a serene pose, calm profile, tranquil hands, a gaze
of quiet dignity reflecting maybe on a selfless
life awaiting its last repose

but there's the bell I'm afraid – right again Sir
it's time and even portrait galleries
like time itself must close

PORTRAIT OF TWO YOUNG GIRLS

(by Willie Apap)

there's innocence of course, and if you look
no closer, if you glance and nod or maybe
recognize but then move on, that's the picture
you carry away with you – a portrait of two
young girls in white, still innocent

you won't remember those crimped frills
still quivering at their shoulders like shrinking
wings, or sashes folding a blue impatience here
a pink reverie there

should you seek further what lurks behind
that paint however, which paint itself conceals
as it reveals, you might perceive a throbbing
a ferment of the skin, blood tugging at two faces
growing in consciousness, emotion grappling
with incipient thought, with challenges
transient as time

there's innocence still of course, but also
a trace of wistfulness at sensing change –
perhaps a restless urgency to grasp it –
if you look closer at the pores in the skin
you might glimpse it breaking out, leaving
its channels for the world to breathe in

LIMESTONE

there's nothing different about this stone
this sun-drenched stone, except your gaze upon it
in a Mediterranean wall hewn out of honey

late afternoon – heat hangs like a fat farmer
drenched in wine, heavy, lazy, too heavy, too lazy
to hoist himself up, the soil has long absorbed
its final drop of rain – parched fields are now golden
your own gaze turned golden – till sun and you
sink into a red horizon into night, into sleep

but hold your breath awhile
tomorrow the sun will rise again

GENESIS

give me back my world of glass
my crystal ball in which Pandora played
before the fall of apples and the rain
Schrödinger started when he put his cat
into its box again

give me back those days before the flood
so I can strangle that sly snake
and stop Cain shedding blood and Abel
smirking like the nerd he was while all
their other siblings just got on with life
and Adam looked around for a new wife

and where the hell was our Eve then?
probably trying to cope with all those
fig-leaves she had to wash, swearing
at her own genesis and all her men

PROFANITY

Twenty minutes into his sermon I cough.
A genuine cough. Spittle has a way
of working itself into my throat without
my knowing how. Can the spleen spit?

He frowns straight at me, increasing and
multiplying accolades for modest wives
contentedly augmenting and tending to large
families, gratefully waiting on time-poor worn-
out husbands back from work. For wasn't it
to propagate that God created woman?
Nuns in one transept sit poker faced.

He scowls outright when, after the first half-
hour, flustered mothers lose control of toddlers
then drones on to laud discipline, caution
against indulging in excess. Exemplary teenagers
further back bow heads, cast eyes devoutly down
to browse their mobiles. I also bow my head
and cough

and cough and cough and keep on coughing
I cough so much I have to leave the church.

LASAGNE*(for Nicholas)*

eating lasagne's a bit like savouring
a poem (if you've a taste for either) –
the complex layering, colourful levelling,
a mixture of ingredients with tangs
that may surprise and above all, ability
at each mouthful to bring it all together
with enraptured half-shut eyes...
a feast of harmony, matter and execution
poet or cook perfectly tuned, a symphony
rejecting linearity, soaring above what's flat –
indeed, if you remove the words (without
which a poet's floored), eating lasagne's also
like biting into a chord

VULTURE

remember that picture of a Sudanese child
groping for life with a vulture behind her?
remember how Carter won an award
for taking that picture, then took his own life
very soon after?

maybe at some point of our lives
we are all that girl, we are all that vulture –
but perhaps only those who stop and snap
know what memories lurk
beneath our laughter.

Kevin Carter's disturbing photo of a starving child being stalked by a vulture during the 1993 Sudan famine won the Pulitzer that year. Four months later, in 1994, he committed suicide.

HAUNTED

(mediterranean 2015)

we scan each wave for flotsam
pointing at us, like fingers

our children splash and treasure
smooth pebbles in their hands
sail boats on our whispers

it's best for them we tell each other
if they don't know

nightly, shadows rattle our windows
whine at our curtains
covet our beds

it's only the wind we say

CEDARS OF LEBANON

The righteous shall flourish like the palm tree: he shall grow like a cedar in Lebanon – Psalms 92

there is no such thing
as righteousness
there is only the chase
and fingers tightening
on its clutch of energy
overlooking borders
hunger and greed

no such thing
without the wild beast, a slaughter of innocence,
torn corpses, red rivers, stench
and the flourishing picking bouquets of poppies
under the cedars of Lebanon

HUMAN RACE

there was water once
lots of water, till a dove
brought a leaf to an ark
and then there was land
lots of land, where we
humans left our mark
to fester and rot, before
looking once more to
the sky above (in case
a dove might be passing
by as a bird that hadn't
been shot) but there was
nothing up there if not
buildings that towered
and planes that fumed
as factories flourished
and industries boomed
while cultures clashed
in countless ways and we
raced on at breakneck pace

why hurry? we're told
no need to worry
there's lots of room
in Space