

Adumbrations

‘As rivers of water in a dry place, as the shadow of a great rock in a weary land’ (Isa. 32.2)

1.

*‘The eyes of them that see shall not be dim.’
The words are spectres, rising off the page;
we need some glimpses in the interim,
to slake each spirit thirsting in its cage.
This is the archetypal human cause:
the rose the poets dreamed of in the past,
the promise that could start a thousand wars,
the faith that brings a better world at last.
Our eyes are baking hard and white as stone;
we leave the shade, the sound of waterfalls
to stumble through these blinding times alone,
content to feel our way around the walls.
Though vision burns within us, hot as coal,
the blazing world is blotting out the soul.*

2.

*‘The eyes of them that see shall not be dim.’
I feel the vision dying in me yet,
as humans blast each other limb from limb
and snarling speeches crowd the internet.
Ours is a weary world indeed, and parched,
the violence escalates and wrongs compound,
recalling us to times when soldiers marched
on mutual death and corpses crammed the ground.
Where is the hope of peace, a stream to lave
the eyes that sting with hatred from the news,
while solemn mourners line each senseless grave
and politicians botch the interviews?
Isaiah points beyond this opaque age:
*the words are spectres, rising off the page.**

3.

*The words are spectres, rising off the page,
faint silhouettes of justice and content,
of better worlds behind this gory stage.
Many have since asked what the vision meant,
these words that part the present as a shroud.
Is history like water? Could we touch
the surface and disturb the wrongs that crowd*

at us, this grim parade of time? We clutch
 the hope, and as we grasp it, hear the sound
 of rivers calling us to peace. They fade,
 chronology returns, and soon we're drowned
 in flooding images that leave no shade.
 How do we change the times in which we swim?
We need some glimpses in the interim.

4.

We need some glimpses in the interim,
 this bottleneck of nightmares has to drain,
 footage that fills our eyesight to the brim
 and pumps its optic poison to the brain,
 numbing the eyes to searing scenes of war
 and terror. Clogged with such atrocities
 the dried-out nerves begin to thirst for more,
 each mind, like film, becoming what it sees
 indelibly. We have to dredge our eyes,
 look through this waterfall of suffering:
 beneath the shadow of a rock, there lies
 a well of inner strength, a hidden spring
 whose waters seep through walls of fear and rage
to slake each spirit thirsting in its cage.

5.

To slake each spirit thirsting in its cage
 we dig among the flint and seek the source
 of righteousness on earth. If dreams assuage
 our doubts, we cling to their mirages, force
 them on the world as cures to all its ills.
 Men war for empty visions, promised lands,
 a travesty of faith that maims and kills;
 they grasp at paradise with bloodied hands,
 brutality with scripture on its lips.
 Our eyes are dim. We magnify the fault
 through self-reliance, letting dreams eclipse
 true vision, gulping water laced with salt.
 To strip the myths that coat our eyes like gauze:
this is the archetypal human cause.

6.

This is the archetypal human cause
 and yet so many times debased, for what?
 False seers fighting for the world's applause

by fanning crowds until their hearts grow hot with kindled rage. True prophets look beyond this Earth. Their rhetoric is cooling, fresh, a spring that vivifies the stagnant pond of worldliness, of sunless views that mesh the mind in algae. How do we discern authentic claims from counterfeits, detect the watermark of truth? We have to learn that rarer sight, by which our minds reflect hope's fleeting hues and hold its image fast, *the rose the poets dreamed of in the past.*

7.

The rose the poets dreamed of in the past concealed eternal meanings in its folds; its petals were the daylight-shadows cast by truths too great for rays the eye beholds shrunk to a pinprick. Dante's paradise and Yeats's rose upon the rood of time were types of truths glimpsed once or twice in centuries: their petals were sublime because impossible. They grew on stalks of laboured observation, holding still the afterimage of a dream that baulks colour and form, despite the artist's skill. This is the image human pride adores, *the vision that could start a thousand wars.*

8.

The vision that could start a thousand wars becomes a vile distortion of the rose, its petals plucked and idolised by scores who overlook the promise they enclose. When demagogues manipulate the crowds to whip up sandstorms, calling darkness shade, they lead us sightless into roiling clouds where, starved of light, the rose's outlines fade beyond remembrance. Cleaving to our guides we find no shelter, only land that cracks and leaves us stranded: prejudice divides us from the truth and winds erase our tracks. Marooned, we long for refuge in the blast, *the faith that brings a better world at last.*

9.

The faith that brings a better world at last
looks through the false divisions leaders sell;
the pattern of this world is far too vast,
too intricate for humans to foretell.
We pick at corners, find loose ends, repeat
familiar cycles: war and prejudice,
defensiveness when walking down the street;
we think in colours, creeds, beliefs, and miss
the fractal whole. Once blinded by the dust
of detail, shrinking dazzled from the glare
of common day, our pupils can't adjust
to greater, fainter truths. We stand and stare,
but as we wait, with faces desert-blown,
our eyes are baking hard and white as stone.

10.

Our eyes are baking hard and white as stone,
like riverbeds that crack without the rain.
Though poets grant us visions to postpone
the steady desiccation, and sustain
our dwindling sight, their loose foundations fail:
words crumble under meanings too immense.
We need those finer symbols, spirit braille,
no equal language of an absent sense,
but tactile signs to help us comprehend
eternal truths. Isaiah helps us find
an inner path, on which we can depend,
that leads to faith's oasis in the mind.
At first we follow, but when faction calls
we leave the shade, the sound of waterfalls.

11.

We leave the shade, the sound of waterfalls,
provoked by gunshots, sirens, news reports,
by close-up film of warzones that appals
the finer sight and wraps our noblest thoughts
in barbed-wire certainties. Alarmed by shouts
and bodies draped in rags, we billow speech
before the dust can settle. Passion routs
the sober sense, drives reason out of reach,
pours volatile opinions on the flames.
Soon, accusations fill the air like smoke
and tongues exude obscurity: each blames
another, churning darkness till we choke.

It takes a clarity that none has shown
to stumble through these blinding times alone.

12.

To stumble through these blinding times alone,
when reservoirs of truth evaporate,
we have to seal our eyes, so error-prone,
and watch the blazing images abate.
Alarmed by scenes that radiate unrest
we shun the crowds, let inner sight adjust
and search for aquifers within the breast,
for rills of faith whose hidden springs we trust
instinctively. Thought's muddied water clears;
now, blessing providence, we dare to drink,
but, as we do, the human compass veers
towards destruction. Leaderless, we sink
in labyrinths where superstition sprawls,
content to feel our way around the walls.

13.

Content to feel our way around the walls
we enter Plato's cave within the heart,
convinced that every symbol fancy scrawls
is sacrosanct. At last, we cannot part
our dreams from paradise, erecting shrines
to shadows, raising idols in our thoughts,
defending lies by laying mental mines,
by building inner border guards and forts.
How can we know the glimpse we win is true,
not surface-bound, but mirroring the word
refracted in the world? Our patchwork view
won't tessellate; its prophecies are blurred:
a corner kindles, then consumes the whole,
though vision burns within us, hot as coal.

14.

Though vision burns within us, hot as coal,
our thoughts reduce to ashes in its wake,
devoured by kindling dreams we can't control.
The mind's a kiln where prejudices bake,
illusion smoulders, fervour overrules
more patient faith and scorches each restraint
of head and heart. At night, conviction cools
and all our daytime certainties grow faint:

we long for streams of prophecy to damp
our cindered visions, left again to mourn
that intuition dies within the lamp,
the embers of a flame that's never born.
Unseen, each searing image takes its toll:
the blazing world is blotting out the soul.

15.

The blazing world is blotting out the soul:
its garish contrast overwhelms the sight,
eclipsing truth and leaving us to scroll
through backlit nightmares, striving to unite
penumbral visions. Tangled in our dreams,
we sleepwalk through a world we never glance,
twining our thoughts round arbitrary schemes
and seeing light where only shadows dance.
We need to seek the shelter of a rock,
to stop perception's spinning zoetrope
of conflicts, errors, falsities that block
our inner progress to the shores of hope.
In drought, in darkness, this remains our hymn:
'The eyes of them that see shall not be dim.'