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;
it 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,
it 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,
ilusion 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:
’T’he eyes of them that see shall not be dim.’