

Summer of the Ladybirds

Can we learn wisdom watching insects now,
or just the art of quiet observation?
Creatures from the world of leaf and flower
marking weather's slightest variation.

That huge dry summer of the ladybirds
(we thought we'd never feel such heat again)
started with white cabbage butterflies
sipping at thin trickles in the drain.

Then one by one the ladybirds appeared
obeying some far purpose or design.
We marvelled at their numbers in the garden,
grouped together, shuffling in a line.

Each day a few strays turned up at the table,
the children laughed to see them near the jam
exploring round the edges of a spoon.
One tried to drink the moisture on my arm.

How random and how frail seemed their lives,
and yet how they persisted, refugees,
saving energy by keeping still
and hiding in the grass and in the trees.

And then one day they vanished overnight.
Clouds gathered, storm exploded, weather cleared.
And all the wishes that we might have had
in such abundance simply disappeared.

1993

That was a strange encounter late last year.
Turning from the museé to the park
I saw them concentrated under trees,
a group of statues idle in a row,
Daphnes, Dianas, Apollos, Acteons ...
waiting to be demolished, or restored
and redeployed and put back in our lives?

Everywhere, I thought, statues are coming down,
leaving their stations, their pigeons, their squares,
stepping off high horses, pedestals, fountains,
leaving their pillars, their airs and their bases,
they come down to earth as if getting off thrones,
everywhere people reshaping their lives.

Some look like bathers enjoying a beach,
others like mannequins waiting for clothes,
others ponder like cows in a field.

Elsewhere in Europe statues are falling,
dynamite helping or pulled down by rope.
But here they are waiting for milder reasons
like people who shelter a while from rain.

Vivian Smith

St James Station

Old lines go rumbling in the hollow vault,
The tunnel turns in from the proximate past;
Air, roots and echoes hang heavily about
Under a crumbling sallow sandstone arch.

It's history now. The station clock marks time.
Picks, spikes and sleepers are ranged in careful piles,
Thick dark green paint embalms the waiting room
Deep underground, where someone likes it still.

Dust seams the hand-hewn walls. No signs are here,
Love's blunt yearnings were long ago erased.
The brass is worn away, the platform bare,
But past the stairs a couple close embrace.

Taking each other's, they take our breath away;
Oblivious here, how shall we meet the day.

Postcards from Cambridge

She's writing postcards on her knee,
Lifts her pen then puts it down;
He's sitting forward absently,
Hands loosely clasped, eyes on the ground.
They've found a park bench in the sun.
Across the green where children play
Two frisky dogs go for a run;
Church-clock chimes sound far away.
And sitting there, a truth's confessed—
Tired of travel overseas,
Familiar things content them best,
Not college spires beyond the trees:

White-haired tourists with jogging shoes,
And plenty of time, and no time to lose.

Midlife Crisis

And settling back into her chair,
Ankles crossed, she's at her ease.
The light falls gentle on her hair,
An album rests across her knees.
And conversation swirls around,
Old friends and teaspoons circulate,
The passing years are lost and found.
Yet something makes her hesitate,
A rueful thought, a private doubt:
She owns her one small vanity,
And shrugs, and gets her glasses out,
And smiles to herself; and me.

Ah love, new beauty sits with you;
This moment has its beauty too.

Adrian Mitchell