

Bourne
toWrite...
creative writing
workshops

Photograph

by Steve Brown

First question: what is saved, and then:
how, why was it, what should it mean?

I.

This photograph: studio-staged, propped
and posed, postcard sized: a young woman,
but severe; a heavy high-backed chair, so rigid
her hands are firmly fixed on arm-rests
as though glued; her face, both open and
impassive, lips pursed, between lemon
and a kiss. The *air* she has assumed
is play-acting and a promise: matriarch
and duty, self-denying, locked in by dark.
A pre-engagement portrait, or pre-marriage, post- ?
1923. A promise not kept.

II.

Short future: dead by '24: post-partum troubles,
possibly, or TB. *'The photo is without future'* ;
this almost so immediately. *'The 'almost' :*
love's dreadful regime.' - Enough time, at least,
to have a baby.

III.

A photograph authenticates a presence,
marks the disappearances. She, gone;
the husband, also gone – not to re-appear
for fifteen years. The baby? Handed on
to the woman's closest friend. No adoption,
no social service's concern, just the ambiguities
of an ad hoc arrangement. The baby will love
absolutely – the figure she will refer to
all her life as 'Win's mum' (Win being
the family daughter closest in age to her,
though separated by ten years). Note:
never the possessive 'my', never 'mine'.
Love in contingency, buffered by 'strangeness',
never family.

IV.

The photograph is evidential: of a *flat death* –
that someone was, is gone. It cannot narrate
the story that surrounds it, even the story
of its own survival. That I hold it now
says something, everything of what I cannot
know. Was it a ritual object,
face traced by a small wet finger? Was it
as obscure as a small dinosaur bone,
something shaken loose out of the black box
of History? All I know is I inherit it
tumbled anonymously in a common box
(‘Cornish clotted cream fudge’, since you ask).

V.

Some portraits seem to spring as fresh
as figures out of Dante, already speaking:
'I lived in Westminster, and I.....' She doesn't.
Too uncertain of her pose and role:
the face unmarked, her hair pinned back.
Her head, an intact amphora, carrying
a script you cannot read. All seems to speak
'constraint', though willingly or not
is unanswerable. The object is

an emanation of light, on paper more sensitive
than mine, a pulse, delayed,
out of a dark and disappearing sky;
it says nothing beyond Time's simple refusal
to resurrect. Negative presence:
the closed horizons of our being.