



# An Unusual Collaboration

A SERENDIPITOUS MEETING

When portrait painter **Jenny Fay** (née Aguda, Chemistry, 1996) and poet **Ian House** (Philosophy, Politics and Economics, 1961) met at a “St John’s on the Road” alumni gathering in Reading in 2017, it was the beginning of an unexpected and unusual creative exchange. Here they reflect on their experience.



Shortly after their meeting, Ian shared one of his poems, ‘Now You See It’, with Jenny. It was his response to ‘Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn’, a work by the Chinese contemporary artist and activist, Ai Weiwei. This nexus between art and poetry captured Jenny’s imagination and prompted her to ask Ian if he would like to sit for a portrait with a view to perhaps writing a poem about the experience. Although there has been a long tradition of portraiture at St John’s, Ian never imagined that he, too, would be ‘gathered into the artifice of eternity’, as, echoing Yeats, he wryly puts it in the resulting poem “Sitting and Thinking”.

The “St John’s on the Road” events have given alumni from different eras and walks of life a rare and valuable opportunity to meet and share their experiences. Whilst talking about their respective occupations, Jenny and Ian realised that they are observers, making notes and sketches to be distilled to the essence of a person, place or moment.

Ian has taught English in England, the United States and Eastern Europe. For twenty-four years he taught at Leighton Park School, an independent Quaker school in Reading. During all that time he wrote about two poems a year. On retirement the floodgates opened. He has had two collections published, both by

Two Rivers Press: *Cutting the Quick* (2005) and *Nothing's Lost* (2014).

After completing her degree in Chemistry, Jenny spent a year at Chelsea College of Art and developed a love of painting in oils. She trained and worked as a patent attorney but returned to painting in her thirties after moving to Oxfordshire. More recently she studied portrait painting at the Heatherley School of Fine Art, Chelsea, where she won the Portrait Diploma prize in 2014.

Although somewhat unsure about being painted, Ian was intrigued by the idea and agreed. Over the next few weeks he travelled several times to Jenny's studio in Goring-on-Thames. As he sat and Jenny endeavoured to capture him on canvas, she talked about what she aims to achieve when painting a portrait. 'Painting in oils,' she says, 'allows you to work and re-work a painting so that it evolves organically. This process is about journeying towards truth.' She adds, 'Part of the beauty of an oil portrait is that all the marks of the journey you've made exist in, and enhance, the finished work.'

As Ian absorbed Jenny's insights into her process, there passed through his mind various thoughts and emotions evoked by having his face and head examined so minutely. He was simultaneously essential to what was going on and merely a mute, stationary object. He was a king enthroned on a dais and a slave ordered to swivel his head an inch

to the right. He was to enjoy the dignity of a portrait and felt as vulnerable as a patient under the scalpel. He was soothed by regular cups of tea and the growing realisation that Jenny was infinitely kinder than Freud and Bacon had been to their sitters.

As they listened to Mozart concertos, time seemed to pass slowly for Ian whilst it hurtled by for Jenny. For her, time is the most important element in creating a portrait. 'The more time you spend with a subject,' she says, 'the richer the image. Time spent chatting over a cuppa is just as valuable as time spent at the easel. As well as seeing the individual's features in animation, I'm constantly observing their idiosyncrasies, looking for what makes them truly unique. As someone once said, "Painting is accumulated looking".'

Ian's poem started as a kind of diary of his thoughts and feelings during the process. He envied Jenny's methodical and purposive way of working and saw how it contrasted with his own buffeting by the caprices and contradictions of thought. Later, of course, there was the conscious honing and shaping during which, as the poem found what it should be, there was some parting from the actual facts.

The dinner at which Jenny and Ian met was, as would have been expected, enjoyable in itself but the fruits of it were, for both of them, a huge and unexpected bonus.

To view Jenny's online portfolio visit [www.jennyfay.co.uk](http://www.jennyfay.co.uk)



## Sitting and Thinking

'How do I look?' is the question  
I ask every morning, shaving.  
scanning the nicks, counting the lines.  
'How do I look?' is the new question  
I ask, shaving this morning:  
about to have my portrait painted,  
about to be gathered – ah, yes! –  
into the artifice of eternity.

\*

The harsh white studio is a hospital ward,  
and the painter in her blotched apron  
is as messy and methodical as a surgeon  
selecting her instruments. 'The eyes and nose,'  
she says, 'and the line to the upper lip  
are called the crucifix.' To this place  
I have brought my own crucifix.

\*

She makes five sketches. Softly  
charcoal smudges the paper, a sound  
as friendly as a kettle warming for tea.  
Then a pencil sketch, a dry scratch,  
a sound needle-thin, and I think  
of Rembrandt's ruthless, tender gaze.

\*

'What I'm after,' she says,  
head cocked, estimating distances,  
is how you look when no one's looking.'  
I think of alizarin, how it's squeezed  
onto the palette as a purple-black blob,  
how it turns to a bright red smear.  
How does it look in its sealed tube?  
What is the sound of a falling oak  
in a deserted forest?

\*

'What I'm after,' she says, 'is your essence,  
the self underlying the faces assumed  
to meet the faces of others.' I sit, still  
as Mont St Victoire while eyes probe my mind  
like endoscopes. She will flay me, fix my skin  
to the canvas in reds and septic greens,  
display to the faces of others a mind  
tender as a snail worked from its shell.  
'The sitter,' she says, 'is a pretext.

It's the brush strokes that matter.  
What I'm after is the moment  
when each mark on the canvas  
responds to what's there already.'  
Like Mont St Victoire I'm a pretext.

\*

Surely time's passing as I sit here,  
enthroned, godlike, gazing  
sightlessly. Surely time's passing  
as a Mozart piano concerto  
skitters and poignantly loiters.  
Surely time's passing as thoughts dissolve  
one into another and then into blankness.  
Each half hour a bell signals a break.  
In her world of dabs,  
of dabs and second thoughts,  
time has hurtled.

\*

'Chin up,' she says:  
like a dentist  
a barber  
a drill sergeant.  
Or is it encouragement?

\*

If she painted as I write,  
she'd dab splodges and squiggles  
wherever, whenever she felt like it  
and hope that somehow, somewhen  
they'd cohere. In fact, she's a scientist,  
takes sightings, measures angles,  
experiments on her palette.  
Neither of us knows where we're going,  
just hope that we'll get there.

\*

The reds, the cadmium yellow and cobalt blue  
on her palette lift my heart and I see  
– yes, that's me! – a swirl of passions  
and I sigh with relief when she mixes them,  
calms them with titanium white  
and – yes, that's me! – I'm rust, I'm brick.

\*

All those hours we've put in,  
the prisoner at the easel,  
the prisoner in the chair  
hoping that within  
what the eye receives in a flash  
there are the many-storeyed years,  
the next moment's uncertainty.

\*

To see myself as she saw me  
is to enter a cold shower:  
I brace, flinch, settle in  
to learn how I looked,  
to learn that head's solid geometry,  
its planes and angles, the patchwork  
of purples and off-whites and biscuits,  
the nose's red triangles.  
There is intelligence in the sweep of the brow  
and the eyes' gaze into distances.  
But whose is that thin-ribboned mouth?  
That secretive, puritanical mouth  
is surely the outcome of silence,  
of not fixing a smile.

I just can't help myself  
explaining and explaining away.

Or is my honesty about self-exculpation  
another of the poet's masks,  
of the artist's craft?  
There are no photographs  
of Rembrandt's furrows and jowls.

*Ian House*

