

Angel with Lute

High on the vaulting as though levitating,
for five centuries I have gazed down
at a blur of straining adam's apples,
gaping nostrils and goggle-eyes focusing
on the frescoes for long enough to take in
my soft colour tones, my wings' pale
transparency, my fingers on the strings.

Against the hair-line cracks in the sky,
faded through the ages, only traces remain
of my halo's gilding. But no disruption
of my features, thanks to my master
having properly prepared his pigments
before drawing my curls and straight nose-line,
the powdery red and green of my costume.

Not just the fee (though that filled his belly),
or religious conviction. I'll tell you a secret.
Invisible from ground level is a small smudge
on my cheek. His last brush-stroke complete
and before they dismantled the scaffolding
my master leaned up and kissed me gently.
After all those years, that still sustains me.

JAMES AITCHISON

A Note on 'Angel with Lute'

Poems prompted by paintings are a difficult genre. They succeed only when the poet goes beyond admiration into an area of imagination that transmutes the painter's craft and artistry into a new and independent work in a different medium. Of all Stewart Conn's painting poems — they include 'Boudin at the Burrell', Vermeer in 'Kitchen Maid', Bartolo in 'Altarpiece', the various painters in 'At Les Collettes' and 'Faces', and Renoir in *The Luncheon of the Boating Party* — 'Angel with Lute' is his most daring.

Part of the daring is the dangerous artifice of a monologue uttered by an angel, because this demands that the poet create a voice and a vision that the reader, even the agnostic reader, can accept as angelic. Through his artistry Stewart makes the artifice wholly convincing, and his poem confirms what I've known for some years: angels exist.

Poets' angels are no longer members of a celestial hierarchy but expressions of spiritual elements in the poet's imagination. In the mind of the artist — the painter who makes an image of an angel with a lute, and the poet who makes an impassioned yet understated response to that image — there is a sacred impulse, earlier than codified religion, that is close to the creative impulse. Both sets of forces are innate. They can be cherished as modes of artistic thought and feeling; they can swell into irresistible imperatives; they can be neglected to death. And the ghosts who disappear at cockcrow, like the ghosts in Stewart's poem 'Letter to Iain', addressed to Iain Crichton Smith, are no crepuscular phantoms; they are expressions of a related sense of the sacred, a sense that allows us to imagine the presence of the dead. These presences are not entirely imaginary: the neural networks that represent persons in our mind survive these persons' deaths.

In an earlier reading of the poem I thought I heard echoes of Paul's *Letter to the Corinthians*: "Though I speak with the tongues of men and angels ..." Paul then speaks of charity, but 'Angel with Lute' says nothing about charity. The reason the painting was made, the angel tells us, was "Not just the fee ... or religious conviction". It was made from the artist's love of his art and of the angelic element in art. A paradox of religious art is that it must defy the Second Commandment: "Though shalt not make unto thee any graven image ..." The artist's love of image-making is greater than his love, or fear, of God.

'Angel with Lute' is a superb summation, perhaps a consummation, of themes Stewart has been exploring for forty years. It is a confirmation of the sacred and creative impulses — and our grief at our fall from grace — that makes us human.