

TIM COLLINS

## WHITE HAT

*for the artist, Betty Eastman*

As I'm washing up and noticing  
 a lemonade sky filtered with streaks  
 of blue light I realise that I'm not  
 foretold to trivial dustings of daily  
 life and understand you're not meant  
 to mention in poems, are you, one's  
 day to day troublesome trawlings  
 like they are some local sport report.

But today after the computer failed  
 and having last night helped a woman  
 with a spotted eye-patch change a flat tyre  
 on the road outside my unit, the night  
 hanging from her like frost left by ghosts,  
 I went mid morning to the Red Hill art gallery,  
 wandering and gazing, looking for something,  
 looking for a feeling, for something emotional to buy.

Most annoyingly, more a pestering,  
 I found a painting titled *White Hat*  
 or should I say, I found *you*, you seemed  
 to have some magnetic life, and I was  
 unsure of its intention, good or bad.

In the car on the way home, you were not happy,  
 and I was certainly aware you hated being covered  
 in the tight dry skin of brown paper with that

icky bubble wrap beneath, on release I sat you  
 gently with awe on the black leather chair.

You were not happy there,  
 I couldn't find a place where your lonely look  
 didn't judge and follow me throughout the house,  
 I knew you needed to be hung on the grey walls,  
 in a prominent place on these grey walls,  
 walls that have been touched by the muses of my five obsessions,  
 Poetry, Art, thoughts of Elizabeth, the music patterns  
 that for years have bounced and tufted themselves into the  
 gyprock texture and the solemn voices of my parents at their  
 lonely last visit, bringing me warmed food in a dish covered with alfoil.

*Whispering (in a corner out of view):*

*I honestly feel this painting has been tinkered to incredibly nasty and  
 sinister Lolita-like thoughts and the painting mount is such an unusual  
 colour, nothing I've seen before, it I think changes shade every now and  
 again, like it has some bit of struggling infant life. It is a stunning deep  
 pastel blue then a green and it often matches the colour of the patches of  
 worry under the young girl's eyes.*

Betty, I ask you now, why paint this girl  
 in such mock peasant attire with looks  
 of disgust, distrust and fear falling down  
 her face and on glancing back these  
 feelings and images are still hung at her eyes,  
 hung like a sticky length of plastic boot lace tape  
 on an iron railing at the edge of a  
 football field, where the open spaces  
 are oddly vacant and lonely.

Each time I look, they hang, menacing  
 in their metaphor of something else,

some hidden reason, leaving some  
 mystery, doubt, like for instance, why  
 with such night flight credentials  
 does the flying fox drench itself over  
 blackened power lines like discarded death.

Betty do you expect me to simply  
 believe that this is just a portrait of a  
 young girl wearing a white hat.

‘Try to find, you fool,  
 it says to me,  
 ‘some place of prominence’  
 I’m supposed to find  
 a place where it can bother  
 whoever passes it, pestering  
 everyone ever endlessly so that  
 one night after having had enough  
 I will just lock it away in a dark  
 time shadowed cupboard  
 behind the old leather jacket,  
 hangered football jerseys and  
 my aunt’s old frocks and hats.

What happened in her life, Betty,  
 what was it that you’ve incarcerated,  
 captured from her life and so deeply,  
 so deeply sullied in oil on canvas.

What is it?

*It is notorious that we speak no more than half-truths in our ordinary  
 conversation, and even a soliloquy is likely to be affected by the  
 apprehension that walls have ears.*

*Erik Linklater*

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TIM COLLINS is a poet, novelist and playwright. In 1997 he was the first Australian awarded a residency at the Chateau de Lavigny International Writers' Colony, Switzerland. His poetry collection, *House of Voices* was short-listed in 1993 Vincent Buckley Poetry Prize and highly commended in 1995 Jessie Litchfield Award for Literature. His sixth poetry book, *Along the Lip's Edge* was launched at the Queensland Poetry Festival 2006. Recently he finished his latest collection, titled *The Crooked Floor*.