

A poem by Charles Causley

*Why do you turn your head, Susanna,
And why do you swim your eye?
It's only the children on Bellman Street
Calling, 'A penny for the guy!'*

The underlying theme of nearly all of Charles Causley's poems is war. World War II in particular, because that was the one that he fought in and the one that left its mark on the 20th century in a way that hardly anybody except Causley seems to have noticed. Charles Causley, like William Blake, wrote about innocence and experience and, like Blake, he used a deceptively simple form of lyric poetry in which to express thoughts which would otherwise have seemed like those of a mad prophet and been ignored. Both poets, to some degree, have been ignored anyway.

*Why do you look away, Susanna,
As the children wheel him by?
It's only a dummy in an old top-hat
And a fancy jacket and tie.*

It is impossible not to be reminded, in this late poem by Causley, of the first of Blake's *Songs of Innocence and Experience* in which the piper pipes 'with merry cheer' and the child listening 'wept to hear'. Impossible, hearing the irony in Blake's voice when he tells us that his 'happy songs' are songs that 'every child may joy to hear', not to think of Causley.

*Why do you take my hand, Susanna,
As the pointing flames jump high?
It's only a bundle of sacking and straw.
Nobody's going to die.*

Halfway through the poem, Causley uses for the first time the line that will end the poem and that now pulls us up with a jerk. If we had not realised already that this is about something more than bonfire night, 'Nobody's going to die' makes us stop and think. What Susanna sees, Susanna the innocent child, is not what the grown-up sees. It is the reverse of Blake's *Nurse's Song* in which the nurse tells the children that their days 'are wasted in play' and their 'winter and night in disguise'. But the meaning is the same. It's just that Susanna has guessed it already.

*Why is your cheek so pale, Susanna,
As the whizzbangs flash and fly?
It's nothing but a rummage of paper and rag
Strapped to a stick you spy.*

By now, if we are alert to the poet's voice, we see what Susanna sees. We see through the grown-up's pretence and recognise his reassuring phrases, it's only this, it's only that, for what they are. Perhaps we stop and glance back at the first three verses, wondering who the children on Bellman Street really are, why Susanna can't bear to look at the dummy in the old top-hat, what causes her to be afraid when she sees the fire. Perhaps we notice how Causley, choosing his words carefully, makes Susanna's reaction each time more disturbing, less easy to ignore. She turns her head, she looks away, she takes his hand and now he sees that her cheek is pale. He goes on trying to reassure her, but the mere fact that he has looked at her and seen how pale she is suggests that he is finding it harder to do so. Pale is a

particularly evocative word, especially when applied to a child. From now on, the poet takes her fear more seriously.

*Why do you say you hear, Susanna,
The sound of a last, long sigh?
And why do you say it won't leave your head
No matter how hard you try?*

For the first time, in the last verse but one, Susanna speaks. Or rather, the poet speaks for her. What she says transforms her into a memory, a memory of war or, more particularly, of the survivors of war. In this poem, as in many others, Causley writes as a survivor. He has heard the 'last, long sigh' of dying men and it won't leave his head no matter how hard he tries. (The slowing down of the line with its three last, long syllables adds to the effect.) There are things that the survivors of war find it difficult to talk about and impossible to forget.

*Best let me take you home, Susanna.
Best on your bed to lie.
It's only a dummy in an old top-hat.
Nobody's going to die.*

Finally, he as good as admits that he is talking to himself. In contrast with the previous verse which, with its run-on lines, is itself a contrast to the others, each line stands alone. The last two echo earlier lines, the last in particular now achieving its full force. This is a different kind of lie from the one that Wilfred Owen called 'the old lie'. His was the lie about dying for your country. Of the two, Causley's is worse. It is a lie of denial. Holocaust denial, Hiroshima denial, Dresden denial, Warsaw denial and all the other denials that came after and are still coming.

Charles Causley stands almost alone among British writers of the second half of the 20th century in not mentioning the war. William Golding, another navy man, tried hard to find his own way of dealing with the things that wouldn't leave his head but that nobody wanted to talk about. He did it in the fable of *Lord of the Flies* and in the image of the child emerging from the flames that begins *Darkness Visible*. Otherwise, you might think the war had never happened, which is what Charles Causley's poetry was all about.