

A Little Town and some of its people

Poems after Flora Twort

Prologue: Flora Cuts Her Hair

Oakshott Hangar, c. 1917.

*“The ‘synthetic family’ was enlarged by the addition of a young student of mine, Hester Wagstaff, and, later, by a friend of hers, Flora Twort” – Doctor Himself: An Unorthodox Biography of Harry Roberts, M.D.
by Winifred Stamp*

“Flora appears quite avant-garde. Her hair is cut in a bob, she wears loose dresses and long beads and is revealed as an effervescent beauty.” – Flora Twort: A Petersfield Artist by Alice Munro-Faure

In this version, Hester hands you the scissors without needing to be asked, without looking up from her jewellery-making. Later, she will fetch the broom, watch as you sweep away the dark.

In this version, you are sat amongst the wild strawberries. You can see clear for thirty miles, hear the harbour of horses below. Hester asks you *why* and you point to the syringa bushes, meaning: their smell.

In this version, there is homemade cider. Yew trees. Peacocks.

In this version, you send a ringlet back home for your mother, feed the rest to the goats who you know from experience will eat anything.

In this version, you bathe afterwards in the stream, specks of hair floating around you like tealeaves spelling out the future in a language only time will teach you.

In this version, you are shocked by the sudden lightness about your face, like a saint. How you walk, dripping, into the kitchen. How Hester puts down her strings of beads, her wire-cutters. How she smiles, says *welcome to the family*.

Flora Meets The Bookshop

1 & 2 The Square, Petersfield, 1918.

You moved under my hand
like a tethered horse. Even then,
through the plaster and cement,
I could hear the beating of your hearth.

I saw a lot of myself in you,
the way you held your bones
like a final art-school ration
of slithered almonds. Even then

I knew you would teach me everything –
all the ways of describing light,
ways of breathing.

You opened your roofspace to me
and I, homing pigeon, flew.

Flora is Woken by Horses

1 & 2 The Square, 1919.

Crayon on paper,
it's like gazing into a stream
with bright stars on its tongue.

Their white eyes. The straw
making moonlight of their manes.

The lucky charms of their shoes.

This is how the farrier must know them –
glowing, swaying like lanterns
down the high street, blown-glass
figurines of horses, cooling, still
capable of breaking and beautiful,
beautiful.

I grab my sketchbook and go.

Flora Outside St Peter's Church at Twilight

a sheep's jawbone dropped
by passing gods long ago
uncovered by rain

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My powdery friends, the moon is just window-shopping tonight. The gold windows across the road are your half-sisters, share a drink – I mean, you are spun from the same light. The streetlamp is so optimistic it breaks my heart; a child playing dress-up with its father's shoes on the wrong feet. Hush. Let it be. The sky is growing and, like all reptiles, must shed its skin or suffocate. The black gate is a note scrawled in the fever-hours, cooled to a memory. I'd much rather the trees. And you, my powdery friends! Is this eternity? Queuing around the corner for tomorrow.

Flora Sees a Man Steal an Egg

Petersfield Poultry Market, 1930.

I say nothing, become his willing accomplice,
able to feel the weight of all the eggs in my own pockets –

a gentleman upright amongst slumping sacks of grain,
a girl the size of a prize rooster, a small green parasol.

The coarse singing of lambs, the bartering of dogs
and children begging for hens of their own,

a woman parcelled in layers of brown paper
gazing over the fence into the sun-coloured hubbub.

I hope her basket is warm with pilfered eggs
big as teapots. That is how I shall paint her.

I've never seen anything so full.

Flora at the Heath

The lake is mostly cloud today.

A woman in boots waits
for the water to write back
from many summers ago.
I can tell from her elbow

she was once the woman
on the beach, kneeling
to bury or fix something,

fasten a sail.

A sky-skirted woman
stands on the jetty.
She touches her son's shoulder.

Summer is coming.

I can hear it, like a foal
unfamiliar with the power
of its own legs. Like water.

Flora Gazes Out From Her Studio Window at the Market Square

1 & 2 The Square, 1930-1939.

Harnesses hang empty outside the saddler's,
braying against each other in the wind.
His white hair is bright enough to wish on.

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That woman there, in the purple, she knows
the right price for a bull, a peony-red rug,
an unworn hat. The girl at her elbow makes notes,
has yet to choose her own colour.

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The bus is so green I think it must be beautiful.
I want Hester to set it in a ring for me.

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The women make a half-rhyme with the statue
of the king on his horse.

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The children are hanging on so fiercely
to their baskets, the insides of their little coats.
I ache to tell them that from my window
the fishmonger's stall is a cornucopia of stars.

Flora Travels to London For the Opening of Her One-Woman Show, 'A Little Town and some of its people'

1931.

London thickens around us.

I close my eyes and imagine

those full-skirted hills, the heath
and its lake smiling like old friends,
the whinnying Market Square,
The Bookshop. Petersfield,

I carry you like a pencil
tucked behind my ear.