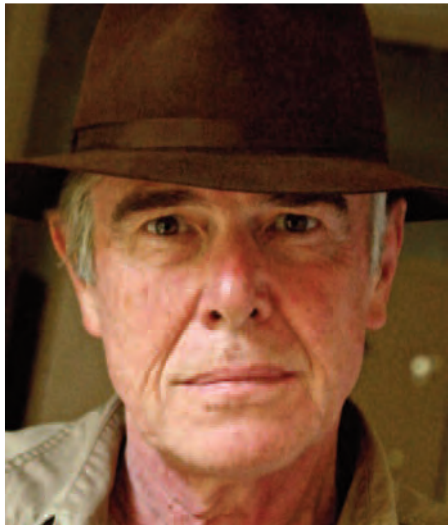


# Fifty Years on



It's nearly fifty years since I left school and I went back last year. It was a summertime reunion of the class of sixty-eight. Those half-familiar faces seen through the time-warp, now, like me, greying and rather scarred by the life in between but nonetheless recognizable as the occupants of our adolescent world. Strangest of all was how much the same it all was. With the exception of new furniture and computer screens, it was all more or less as it was. It smelled the same. The art room, the dining hall, the assembly hall, the stairs; all that seemed to be missing were 'Egg' Bolton's fish tanks on the corridor window ledges, where we queued up for dinner. This place where I grew up and learned the hard way, as most of us do, about how and how not to handle ourselves had lived in me for most of my life since in dreams and flashbacks and here it all was preserved in aspic.

I wasn't a good school student. I didn't fit easily into either hierarchy, academic or sport. In history I learned how to torture Peter Freeman for being a heretic, whatever that was, and in games I learned how to skive off and hang out in the paper room in the cellars with the other bad lad smokers and then taste the sting of Ryan's size

twelve pump. But I was good at art and in my later years I seemed to spend most of my time in the art room trying to win the approval of the heroic Mr Vaughan. He lived in Leeds and drove to school in a red MGB. What better role model? Of course, I left with pretty mediocre qualifications and took off to Art School, St. Martins, in London and it was there that life suddenly became 3D.

It was 1968 after all and I found myself at the heart of an explosion of new ideas and ways of living and I loved it. Of course, I didn't really understand this brave new world, in particular the new art world I found myself floundering in but I was fired and desperate for some sort of education. I came back to Halifax and learned how to study and took a couple of fast-track A-levels at Percy Whit. and fluked myself into a Philosophy/Fine Art degree at Leeds, where I discovered that in fact I was quite bright. I got a decent degree and off I went with a scholarship to Berkeley, California and a rosy-looking academic career. Fun and games and, towards the end of graduate work, I took a job as philosophy lecturer in Sierra Leone.

I felt at this time that life had a sort of sense to it, unfolding through severe lessons in how to live...the pointlessness of hedonism; a serious lesson in theory of knowledge in Sierra Leone, where the nature of reality slapped me in the face 24/7 for the four years I was there. It was an extraordinary period in my life, which I guess shaped me more than any other and taught me to love Africa. On returning to the UK, I was rapidly enrolled into advanced practical ethics, the necessity of necessity, when my mum was diagnosed with Motor Neurone Disease, and I decided to stay and help her with it. One of the most profoundly disturbing lessons but it was then that I met my wife, Jackie, and learned to love without the usual insanity, and without whom I couldn't have done it.

Life went on. After a time I became art his-



torian in a school of art and I was there for twenty-something years. I loved my work. Art students are a joy to teach; they have such imagination and are so excited by visual ideas. And so we settled down in a lovely Victorian house in the academic ghetto in Leeds. By and large good times. We raised our two girls, who, in spite of the usual ordeal, were an absolute delight. We had always intended to raise them in part beyond the UK, and preferably Africa, so here we are, in Nairobi. Jackie took a contract with an NGO and I brought a painting project, making portraits of the extraordinary folk of Kenya. We've been here eight years now and, aside from the occasional itchy feet, we love it. We live in a small house, which lets out into a tropical garden, filled with giant plants and riotous colour. Jackie works for the development wing of the BBC and I make pictures. For me it's a curious closing of a circle, imagery which focuses on what we are, an ongoing process of learning, which began back then. And I now understand what a heretic is, and embrace it. It still strikes me as unlikely I made it this far but it's been one hell of a trip... so far.

DALE WEBSTER  
(1961 - 1968)

