

At the Tomb of Elizabeth Coke

(*Bramfield, Suffolk*)

Time's slow element
renders her bones
dust, yet their effigy
(robed in a quarried flesh
tucked round with frills
and pleats rigorously pressed)
bears cold witness.

"She died in childbirth: here
she lies, caught in the pathos
of such an end." The guidebook
lies, as it tries to read pathos
in tapered alabaster fingers
curved and poised as if caught
between phrases traced on the virginals.

When Arthur Coke commissioned
this copy of a lost original,
why did the sculptor, who made
each marble fold so lifelike
we reach to stroke the ripples,
chisel an artful smile
above the polished chin?

Did he feel pain
had cut the true figure
into his patron's heart?
Did *he* choose stone because
stone is too slow to catch
the heart's ripples? Here it lies
to face the hardest truth.

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