

POETRY

by

T.S. KERRIGAN

Strandhill

Manannan mac Lir
drifts like a grey fog
along this west of Ireland coast,

the crones of Sligo say,
his voice in the rising wind
muttering black spells,

troubling the blood's memory
with images of ancient storms,
the wreckage on far shores.

I picture him on solitary rocks,
gauging the tides' movements
and the moon's pale changes,

urging the white-headed
stallions of the dark Atlantic
hard on this peaceful strand.

Maugherow

—for Victoria

I remember a cold wind
giving querulous tongues
to ash, oak, and willow
that morning in Maugherow,

the sweep of your brown hair
across a white pillow,
the scant outline of your breasts
beneath grey linen.

I remember, out our window,
Queen Anne's Lace
blown on a ruined gate
at the edge of Donal's field,

the black and white cattle
like ghosts in the first light,
our two bodies merging
in the wild tangle of bedding.

Sleepwalker

–for Elizabeth

My shadow daughter ventures far,
following her nightly itineraries
to places she knows I'll never discover.

I wonder about those distant seacoasts,
those luxuriant rainforests where she loiters,
the strange luminous creatures she encounters.

Leading her back to her bed in the darkness,
I envy her, weary from her journey, the fantastic
shells and flowers she clutches in her hands.

**Further Reflections
on
The Sexual Revolution**

With Paolo and Francesca made to spin
in swirling air for one pathetic sin,
we contemplate the cataclysmic gust
devised to punish our prodigious lust.

Rivers

“Our body is a molded river.”

—Novalis

**I could wade in the long flowing
stream of your hair and limbs,
the cool shallows of your skin,**

**trace your elusive currents,
with the stroke of a fingertip.**

**I could swim in your headwaters,
the rush and flow of rapids
carrying me downstream**

**to depths black and mysterious
as the languid tropic night.**

**Drawn to a spiraled transcendence,
the pale confluence of bodies,
I could enter those darkest of waters**

**the swimmer at one with the river,
whole in that cleaving embrace.**

Dublin: Autumn Dusk

The clock above the Irish Times
forswearing the faltered day.

A slathering mist on the hills.

A gaffer outside a pub,
entrusting passing strangers
with the secrets of his arid age.

A flurry of gulls on the Liffey.

A crone in a shawl at the water's
edge, beckoning to death.
with frail and brittle gestures.

The rippling image of a face
in the glimmering water below me
(poor dogsbody!).

The heavy air sinking
as darkness palls the streets.

Ancestors

They tend to reappear at dawn,
the somber men in rumpled tweeds
converging on the shadowed lawn.

They much prefer this time of year,
these amber-shaded autumn days.
God knows, we never asked them here.

Too grave to meet us face to face,
they merely peer through shrub or hedge.
They ought to haunt some other place.

Tonight they'll pace the hall upstairs
in Wellingtons, possessed again
by strange *malades imaginaires*.

With luck, they won't come back next year
with swooning girls in pinafores.
God knows, we never asked them here.

The Late Humanitarians

The institutes that bear their names
are, after all, just steel and glass,
memorials to causes lost,
the common man's ingratitude.
(They knew such things would come to pass.)

Aware their stores of love and light
would barely serve to strike a line
from all the rolls of human want,
they wrung their hands and persevered.
(They never claimed, "We saw a sign.")

The urchins scrawl obscenities
across each weathered marble bust
some local politician set
in isolated public squares.
(They knew all things must come to dust.)

The Bridge to America

On board the rotting coffin ships
they fingered icons, beads,
invoked the Sacred Heart of Christ,

my Sligo forbears, proud in rags,
with mouths of crooked teeth,
the meek who dared inherit earth.

Unswayed by intimations scrawled
across prophetic winds,
they hailed the solitude of stars.

At last a landfall came in view,
a dark expanse of coast,
this brooding New Hibernia.

I picture them on rundown wharfs,
the greenhorns striking out
for Canaans all across the land.

Pretenders to the whirlwind night,
the vast unchosen staked their claims,
the meek who dared inherit earth.

Voyager

– Hilary Teresa Kerrigan
(b. October 12, 1981)

Unmoored in swaddling seas
(the sea within the womb,
the sea of night before),
the voyager embarks.

What voices call her home
beyond the shoals of time,
the long awaited child?

Her season come at last,
she makes her way tonight
across that trackless deep,
that distant dark beyond.

What longing makes her seek
this harborage of light,
the long awaited child?

**Incident in a Perfectly
Respectable Bar**

Friday, fellows from the mill,
paychecks cashed, repaired to Mel's,
had some laughs, and drank their fill.

Midway through the rounds of beers,
someone (who, no one recalls)
grouched about some "goddamned queers."

Taking off his overcoat,
Mortimer, a shipping clerk,
rose and loudly cleared his throat.

"Socrates was gay," he roared,
gesturing with jeweled fist.
"Julius Caesar, Constantine,
Nero, Alexander, Christ."

Down the bar the workers jeered.
Others glared or turned away.
Undeterred, he persevered:

"Proust, Nijinsky, Delacroix,
Leonardo, Wittgenstein."
That became the final straw.

Striding through that raucous scene
unabashed, he slipped away,
militant, transcendent queen.

**Requiem for a Lesser
Shakespearean Actor**

His Benedick before the war,
the *Guardian* pronounced a bore.
The *Times* declared his Prospero
was better twenty years ago.
His final turn, a mumbling Lear,
his fellow actors couldn't hear.

But picture him in grave repose,
in clothes his faithful dresser chose.
What some have called his stony brow
seems calm and understated now.
his flailing arms, for once at rest,
Impart the somber subtext best.

Though never one to grace the stage
with comic wit, heroic rage,
he'll fill this walk-off part today,
the final role all actors play.
Too bad he lacks the wherewithal
to take a final curtain call.

Daughters

– For Leda, Katherine,
Hilary, and Elizabeth

You emerge auspiciously on the planet,
the strangers we crafted in darkness,
wearing the bodies we provided
(fashioned so they fit you perfectly).

You crawl happily at our feet,
our fair supplanters on the earth,
in that new and vivid flesh.

One day you surprise us as women,
waiting for our astonished approval
as though you'd done a flip or a handspring.

Listen to me for once, my progeny –
already time is beginning
to turn its back on your parents.

I speak to you in the words of one
obscured by the gathering shadows –
fall in love often,
bear children like yourselves.

**Conversations in the Dark
at the Winter Solstice**

In the midst of life we are in death.
– Book of Common Prayer

I

My father rings at four:
“Your mother’s gone,” he says.
“She never left before.”

“She died in early May,”
I utter, half-asleep,
unsure what else to say.

I feel his disbelief
across the trembling wires,
in increments, his grief,

until, detached and dry,
the voice of someone else
is telling me goodbye.

I tell myself beware
what night engenders there.

II

I hear my daughter cry
at five downstairs. She dreams
she hurtles down the sky.

I’ve known that primal scare,
that terrifying sense
of tumbling through midair.

I hold her, first of all,
as though these clumsy hands
could break her silent fall,

then whisper, “sleep,” aware
what night engenders there.

Be Thankful, Unicorn

Be thankful, Unicorn,
your kind does not exist.

Chimera, Cyclops, Gnome,
your terrors live in dreams
some ancient mind conceived.
We move to darker themes.

Be grateful, Basilisk,
your sort was never born.

Behemoth, Dragon, Sphinx,
be happy you're ideal;
these times engender forms
more terrible, more real.

The Jargon of Lovers

The jargon of lovers has no word for absence.

With her image only a blur in your mind
you were certain your blackest hours had passed.

But a snatch of music, the *Valse des Fleurs*,
playing over and over in your head,
had you twisting in your sleep last night.

By morning the fragrance of jasmine in the garden
(reminding you of the scent she always wore)
came flooding through the white billowing curtains.

As you moved through crowds in the awakening streets,
you encountered her lips on every woman's face,
littering the morning like rose petals.

The jargon of lovers has no word for regret,
no name for the cold stations of memory.

Durrell at Olympia

Those images encountered there,
those struggling figures caught in stone,
would haunt his meditative nights:

Divine Apollo holding forth,
a vanquished centaur by the hair.

In times of strife he'd learn to bear,
like Byron, Shelley years before,
the augral thud of unshod hoofs,
the wild, barbaric cries at night,
those harbingers of man's despair.

He dared, as poets always dare,
posed questions to these stones.
*Who freed those beasts from fence and fold
philosophy wrought long ago?
The god who used to seize their hair?*

Wordsworth

God was to him the forest,
the stag stirring at twilight
on the banks at Windermere,
as time flashed upon the lake.
And the young season dissolved.

God was to him the meadow.
Hours bore his angels away
in yellow ragwort summers
miles from all the smokestack towns.
And the summer departed.

God was to him the mountain.
He climbed where the eagles soar,
to the elegaic crags
above the nascent valleys.
And he died on the mountain.

T.S. Kerrigan was born March 15, 1939 in Los Angeles and lives there still. He is married to the actress Victoria Thompson and has six children.

Kerrigan obtained his undergraduate degree from the University of California, Berkeley and his law degree from Loyola University in Los Angeles in 1964. Kerrigan was admitted to the California Bar in 1965 and has served as president of the Irish American Bar Association.

Kerrigan's poetry has appeared in various periodicals, including the *Southern Review*, *International Poetry Review*, *Poetry Monthly*, *Kansas Quarterly*, *Pacific Review*, *Tennessee Quarterly* and in journals in Europe. A collection of Kerrigan's poetry, *Another Bloomsday at Molly Malone's Pub and Other Poems*, was published by The Inevitable Press in 1999. Kerrigan's work has recently been included in *Good Poetry*, a new anthology by Garrison Keillor issued by Viking-Penguin in October, 2002.

Kerrigan is also a theater critic, a member of the Los Angeles Drama Critics' Circle, and the author of several plays, including "Branches Among the Stars" (Louisville, 1990). The more recent plays have been produced in Los Angeles at the Ensemble Studio Theatre where he served as a member of the Board of Directors and at the Globe Playhouse.