

**T.S. KERRIGAN**

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**My Grandmother Spoke of Cranes**

A flock of whooping cranes surprised her once,  
descending from above a bank of clouds,  
in far Alberta long ago, when she  
was young, a prairie farmer's wife.

Enormous birds, their feathers white as snow,  
they passed by overhead, above the farm.  
"I still can hear their call," she told me late  
in life, mistaking me for Fred, her son.

She came from rugged stock, my grandad's wife.  
She bore her first live child alone, then took  
the infant, wrapped in wool, for miles across  
the drifts of snow, to show her startled spouse.

Around Alberta then, most people thought  
it lucky to observe a single crane;  
she'd seen a flock that day above the farm,  
a mass of white against a greyish sky.

They sold the place and moved away before  
the power lines were strung, the marshlands drained.  
If carcasses were strewn across those plains,  
well, God gave man dominion over fowls.

She died in California, miles away,  
still speaking of those birds, that distant farm.  
And no one's seen the sight of whooping cranes  
in western Canada in fifty years.

## The Aria She Sang

Her lovely fingers struck the keys  
those weekend nights the neighbors came.  
*L'amour est un oiseau rebelle,*  
she sang in that soprano voice,  
like some flirtatious femme fatale.

(In dreams, I've heard that voice again,  
and once, at night, on some breen  
in rural Ireland years ago,  
I turned, but no one dogged my steps.)

She played when others rose to sing:  
"The Minstrel boy," "Old Folks at Home,"  
"I'll Take You Home Again, Kathleen"  
"The Croppy Bo," and "Old Black Joe."  
(my specialty—"Don't Fence Me in.")

My father sat behind the rest  
and never sang a bar, so ill  
at ease he'd often leave to smoke  
a cigarette and disappear.

(I hear his failing steps again  
tonight in rooms across the hall.  
He cries each time I speak her name.  
His grief seems unendurable.)

An understanding, unexpressed,  
informed their lives. I can't recall  
a soulful kiss, a bold embrace,  
and yet they hardly ever fought.

*L'amour est un oiseau rebelle.*  
What wantonness her voice possessed.  
But was it love's extremity  
we heard each time she sang that song?  
Or was it passion manifest?

## **Land's End**

Our nightly walk on sandstone cliffs  
seems done, when Garryowen stops  
beneath a pallid crescent moon,  
this time to sniff a clump of ferns,  
a heap of eucalyptus leaves.  
I gaze beyond the white-capped surf  
and think about the fall of man.

Invested with those mysteries,  
the rhythms of the earth and sky,  
the "primitives" of ages past  
set sail across this sea, we're told,  
without a compass, gyroscope,  
in fleets of flimsy hand-hewn craft,  
beholding things along the way  
no modern sailor sees or hears.

Invested with such knowledge once,  
what made man break the pagan link  
with earth, make blind the hidden eye?  
Were we, his issue, dispossessed,  
the generations set adrift  
in some lamented, far off time?  
Were we cast from the garden twice?

## Summer Snow

The winters at my uncle's lodge  
are faded childhood memories,  
except that vivid face of hers  
I saw just once when I was eight.

Returning from the slopes one day,  
I shivered by a blazing fire.  
Two girls I'd never seen approached.  
"Been sledding through the snow?" one asked,

a stunning girl of twelve or so,  
with long black hair and deep blue eyes.  
"I bet you're freezing cold," she purred.  
I lied, a quaver in my voice.

"You haven't found the summer snow beyond  
the ridge?" she asked. "There's drifts and drifts.  
It's warm and cozy there. You just lie down  
and let it cover you; it's dreamy stuff."

Her silent friend exchanged a look with her.  
"I guess we have to go," she said. "Goodbye,  
but don't forget those drifts of summer snow.  
Perhaps we'll see you there some time."

A blaze destroyed my uncle's lodge  
next autumn, when it didn't rain.  
Although we didn't know it then,  
we'd spent our final winter there.

What slopes I see these days appear  
in dreams of summits far away.  
I pull my sled across that ridge,  
still seeking drifts of summer snow.

## **Kincarrie Miller**

A sickly girl, we took her in that spring  
when I was ten, my brother twelve,  
another of my mother's strays. As I  
recall, her salesman father had to leave  
on business trips from time to time.

They'd moved into the neighborhood, the wife  
and mother's absence unexplained,  
some months before. Though just fifteen, disease  
had culled the roses from Kincarrie's face  
and left her eyelids purple-veined.

She seemed content to share a room with boys,  
read novels, spoke a little French,  
and looking down her spectacles, disdained  
our "bourgeois" neighborhood, where none, she said  
read Gide, Hugo, de Maupassant.

One night while sprawled across the upper bunk  
my eyes strayed from my grammar book,  
to see her, having brushed her teeth and hair,  
emerge in bra and panties sans her robe,  
still drying on the back yard line.

Impulsively, I doused the light, jumped down,  
and clasped her body close to me,  
my skinny, trembling arms around her waist,  
my throbbing face between her girlish breasts.  
"What's going on?" my brother yelled

I instantly released her unresisting form,  
aware her eyes were fixed on me.  
My brother rose and turned the light back on.  
I stared at him but gave him no response.  
I didn't understand myself.

I flicked the light off two more times that night.  
She looked at me as though her eyes  
had never really seen my face before.  
My angry brother knocked me down and made  
me cry. "What's wrong with you?" he screamed.

That fall her father got a job up north.  
I watched the Bekins moving van  
depart with all their worldly goods inside.  
I thought of how that fragile body felt  
that night while gathered in my arms.

My fourteenth spring a voice outside  
my bedroom door awakened me.  
I heard enough to know Kincarrie died.  
“She never got the proper care,” my aunt  
exclaimed. I couldn’t sleep that night.

So set apart by circumstance, did she  
accept my passion willingly?  
Would other arms encircled her? Or was  
I last to draw that pallid body close  
before the cold embrace of earth?

## Ten

She hadn't shown her face in years,  
but who'd forget those nordic charms,  
those awesome curves, those massive spheres?

The sighting of a limousine  
meant soon we'd have a look at her,  
that exile from the silver screen.

That beauty fame once certified  
as pure perfection soon appeared,  
her withered husband by her side.

And then we saw, to our surprise,  
a china doll, a peppercorn,  
a Venus of diminished size.

Was this the perfect woman then,  
this miniature, this fingerling,  
this actress hype proclaimed a ten?

Were hapless Paris still alive,  
who chose between the goddesses,  
he'd readjust her score to five.

## **A World Remade**

They find the times in retrograde,  
their choir of voices growing thin,  
who longed to see a world remade,

who faced the future, unafraid  
of enemies outside, within.  
They find the times in retrograde.

For years they went to church and prayed  
a better day would soon begin,  
who longed to see a world remade.

We've felt their expectations fade  
with each succeeding bulletin.  
We find the times in retrograde,

with recompense so long delayed,  
the many lose the will to win,  
who longed to see a world remade.

The selfish wage the old crusade.  
We hear their ever growing din.  
We find the times in retrograde,  
who longed to see a world remade.



## **An Aging Poet Calls on New Year's Day**

**"That rank dissembler time has done me in,"  
he laughs until he loudly coughs up phlegm.  
"And all the damned distractions we invent.  
I've spent too many hours in seedy bars.  
You wake one day, hung over, sick, and know  
you've aged between the night and morning hours."**

**"My parties all degenerate to what  
you saw last night. I thought about the thing  
you said. It's true, I taunt the hangers on,  
the fools, for sport, to make some truth emerge.  
It rarely does, of course, and then I scream  
at them. It doesn't stop them coming back."**

**"The women are another thing: you fall  
for them (whatever that implies), and then  
the arguments begin, her beauty gets  
too rich for use, and soon she's out the door.  
I've never been the kind to mope or fret,  
there's always been another close at hand."**

**"The readings pay the rent. They come in droves,  
the kids who've read Jack Kerouac. They want  
met to perform the role they came to see,  
the angry poet set against the world.  
You'll never know the things I suffer, Tom,  
with all the readings, signings, interviews."**

**"I might have written volumes more by now  
I've tried to work a little very day and can't.  
Who gives a damn what Graves or Stevens said?  
I need to waste a day or two, get drunk  
or laid. I think it helps me pacify  
the work that always gnaws inside my guts."**

**"Who knows if anyone will read my stuff  
in twenty years, or even ten, it's all  
a gamble, cards or dice, a slot machine.  
We're given no assurances at all.  
To think I used to have a steady job  
and didn't have to take each day on faith."**

**“My God, I’ve droned away about myself  
and never got around to why I called.  
I thought I’d have a party Friday night,  
the same familiar crowd of bores, of course,  
and still, it might be fun. I hope you’re free.  
This writing’s such a goddamn lonely game.”**

## **Suburban Incident**

'The time of day?'  
'I parked my car outside his place at 7:10.'

'Describe the car,'  
'A pale blue Jaguar XKE.'

'You rang the bell?'  
'I knocked, he let me in. I knew he would.'

'What happened then?'  
'I made demands, demands he claimed he couldn't meet.'

'Such as?'  
'I wanted all the bank accounts, the house.'

'Indeed.'  
'He couldn't talk, he said. He had to see some little bitch.'

'What happened then?'  
'I struck a blow, a blow he hadn't counted on.'

'Describe the blow.'  
'A downward blow.'

'Which struck?'  
'The head.'

'The top? The side?'  
'The frontal bone.'

'The instrument employed?'  
'A vase.'

'A vase?'  
'Of course.'

'Describe the vase.'  
'Faux Greek, Corinthian.'

'To what effect?'  
'He fell.'

'What happened then?'

'I crossed the room to get my purse.'

'Describe the purse.'

'A Gucci, brown with leather trim.'

'Accessories?'

'Oh, brass, I think.'

'The articles inside?'

'My keys, my makeup kit, Chanel cologne, my checks, etc.'

'You had a knife inside the purse?'

'Of course.'

'Describe the knife.'

'A boning knife, Solingen, stainless steel.'

'Your knife?'

'Of course.'

'The victim hadn't stirred in all this time?'

'He lay there dazed.'

'What happened next?'

'I made my move before he rose.'

'You used the knife?'

'Of course.'

'Describe his wounds.'

'His bloody forearm warded off my thrusts. I saw no other wounds.'

'How many thrusts?'

'I counted three.'

'What happened then?'

'The blade was dull; it broke upon the final thrust.'

'Your state of mind?'

'I stood dumbfounded, rooted to the spot, the handle useless, still within my trembling hand.'

'What happened then?'

'The strangest thing of all, a most unlikely, unexpected thing.'

'Describe this strange phenomenon.'

'We looked in one another's eyes for what seemed an eternity.

We neither spoke nor moved. I felt I understood him then,  
the first, the only time in twenty years. Though why I can't  
explain.'

'Describe this look.'

'A soulful look, I'd say.'

'How long did this transpire? An estimate?'

'I couldn't say You just can't time a thing like that.'

'Your state of mind.'

'It suddenly occurred to me his kitchen's off the living room.

I knew he had some knives in there, much sharper ones.'

'What happened then?'

## **Aubade**

**Their spouses still asleep indoors,  
they leisurely retrace  
their steps at dawn, their arms entwined,  
content in pearly light  
to sniff an early rose or two.**

**The daffodils have reappeared  
in clumps beneath the oaks.  
They find their special bench again,  
grown shy, who were so bold  
last night beneath a darker sky.**

**Remembering the wild bouquets  
they gathered here, their years  
together, years apart, they sit,  
recalling vanished things,  
the squandering of all those springs.**