

TS KERRIGAN

The Berkeley Hills

Though scattered through a hundred towns,
their college days long past them now,
I still can feel their presence here,
the girls we coaxed on autumn nights
among these lonely, windswept hills.

Relentless winter blows away
the signatures their bodies etched
on wooded slopes and meadow grass,
those pathways where no trace remains
of transient markings passion left.

When fall transforms these glades and woods,
what memories remain for them?
The images of fumbling boys
who drew them down in darkness once
among these lonely, windswept hills?

Christmas Ghosts

I always sense them drawing near,
Repeating all their old complaints,
Those wraiths that no one else can hear.

I've thrown away their letters, notes,
Mislaid their faded photographs,
Forgotten all their anecdotes.

"Just wait," they warn. "You'll see the day,
Perhaps before your body's cold,
Your own effects are tossed away."

The children long for Christmas Eve,
The presents underneath the tree
They wait for unseen hands to leave.

We sit around the radio,
Hear "Silver Bells" and "Silent Night,"
Reflect about the chance of snow.

"You'll know the truth the week you die,"
That choir of bitter voices drones.
I've learned to turn the volume high.

The Monaghans

They'd scour the countryside
and find some grassy bed,
the lissom girl beneath,
the tousled boy astride.

We'd see them after dark
her hair of palest oak
espalliered in the grass,
in meadow, field, and park.

Until grey-fingered days
brought righteous wind and rain,
no patch of ground was spared
these amorous forays.

That hair has gone to snow
from shades of palest oak.
For years a vital man,
arthritis brought him low.

So freighted with the years,
they rarely venture out,
how odd they both suggest
this latter love is best.

El Camino Real

Of all who passed this way
and found these larkspur hills,
this green exotic coast.

Its former citrus groves
(long fallen to the axe),
the blue-eyed dons endured.

Unlike that Spanish monk
who forged this stretch of road,
they came for gold, not souls.

His kind could not preserve
the rancho life for long;
soon all were dispossessed

of haciendas, land,
the fragile missions left
to crumble into dust.

Then *El Dorado* rose
again on Chumash shrines,
the pueblos named for saints.

The blue-eyed dons endured,
and, corpse by bloody corpse,
they humanized this land.

Insomniacs

What are they listening for, night after night,
shackled in their dark prisons
like the final survivors on the planet?

Their descent to the quarries of sleep
wasn't barred by a noise on the stairs,
the creaking timbers in the attic,
a voice on the street outside.

They were locked away in these shadows
at a time too distant to remember
by the cry of a child they didn't answer,
the plea of a lover they ignored,
the sum of their small monstrosities.

What are they waiting for, night after night
the dawn to arrive and deliver them
for a time from the dark figures
of the years, the afflictions of memory?

Villonesque

— *Mais ou sont les neiges d'antan?*

I.

Please tell me, if you can, *mon frère*,
How all those former wantons fare:

The nymphets, virgins, teasers, flirts
Who always acted so demure
In mini, midi, maxi skirts;

Nicole, I met behind the stair,
Who came to me sans underwear;

Gervais, who left at break of day
By climbing out my window sill,
A ghost in filmy lingerie.

And where, *mon frère*, does passion go,
In *billets-doux*, the cant of verse?

And what's become of last year's snow?

II.

And where are all those Adelaides
Whose faces blur across decades?

The Angeliques of singles bars
In pushup bras and clinging pants,
Who incandesced like falling stars?

And where's Marie, who promised bliss,
But only gave me Tosca's kiss?

And Madeleine, the ingenue
Who followed me around for days,
a lover pushing 42?

And where, *mon frère*, does beauty go,
In memory, oblivion?

And what's become of last year's snow?

Secretly Reading My Mother's Magazines in Childhood

We had very few books and no library near
That old tumbledown house at the end of the street,
In that neighborhood stinking of cabbage and beer.

So I savored the love lives of Allison, Dawn,
All those Merediths, Ericas, Tiffanys, Belles,
In my bedroom upstairs or the chaise on the lawn,

Though on greater reflection those names seemed as queer
As *soufflé de poisson* or *escalopes de veau*
In a neighborhood stinking of cabbage and beer.

And I thought to myself as I read more and more,
I might find that oasis of beauty and grace
And encounter those women I'd grown to adore.

But a moment of truth proved my hour of despair.
I'd been lied to, defrauded, seduced and betrayed,
Like some pitiful character out of Flaubert.

With that paradise lost, my dilemma was clear:
I was trapped in a world full of Marys and Anns,
In a neighborhood stinking of cabbage and beer.

Aspects of Claire

I see her cross the ward and swear,
The way her body moves, it's Claire.
But every time I call her name,
It's just a nurse from down the hall
Who's nothing like my Claire at all.
It happens every time the same.

We'd go out dancing, have some beer,
She talked about a film career—
How lovely Claire was then, before
They sent me off to fight a war.
It never once occurred to her
That few come back the men they were.

I read her notes out there each day,
That desert half a world away.
I wrote her back, described the wind.
I tried to make her understand
That wind which overtakes the land,
Can also overtake the mind.

Claire's newest film came out last May.
They showed it in the ward today.
I watched, but never said a word.
She grows more lovely frame by frame,
The girl I lost and can't reclaim.

A Male Dancer's Life

You're never who you think you are;
The trick's pretending not to care.
Imagine you, a concert star!

That costume girl in sheer peignoir
Admired your moves and derriere
You're never who you think you are.

You've learned the steps and repertoire,
Affect a certain savoir-faire.
Imagine you, a concert star

Who strolls into an uptown bar,
Baryshnikov or Fred Astaire,
You're never who you think you are.

Your agent says you'll go quite far
With Beau Gallant your *nom de guerre*.
We're never who we think we are.

One day they repossess your car.
You gain some weight and lose some hair.
You're never who you think you are.
Imagine *you*, a concert star!

Elegy for an Actress

I always thought we'd meet again some day,
With you in pink or purple *crepe de chine*.
We'd have a glass or two of Chardonnay
And chat about the local drama scene.
Instead, I sit inside a dive alone
Off Fuller Street and nurse a Black and White,
A place with just a single telephone,
But then I won't be calling you tonight.
For you there's no Millennium, no chance
To rectify your failings down the years,
Not even one more, free for all, romance
No falling out, no last display of tears.
Upstaged by Death, you've left the masquerade,
Who lent a breadth to every part you played.

— *Hollywood, 1999*

The Muslin Dress

The Sunday train to Abbeyfeale
Came clattering past stacks of hay,
The prickly gorse and Hawthorn rows,
Brought home a girl too long away.

The band played Kerry polkas late
That night at Tommy Tobin's place.
The moment she came into view,
The color rose in each lad's face.

We watched her move across the room,
The scarlet muslin dress she chose
Revealing long and shapely legs.
We'd rarely seen the like of those.

And, oh, we thought, to be the man,
Of all who danced with her before,
To hold her in our arms that night,
A heap of muslin on the floor.

The Girls of Halcyon Days

Unlike the sort with parasols
Who chose to hone their female charms
In *fin de siecle* horsemen's arms
As soon as they'd outgrown their dolls,

The girls affecting country airs
Upstanding bachelors took as wives
Had lived provincial social lives
At Baptist socials, county fairs.

They never heard, much less conceived
That every carefree step they made
Beyond that sheltered aspen glade
Could never later be retrieved,

But Life, which never goes as planned,
Afflicts us all with age, disease,
While meting out its grim decrees
In ways we never understand.

It shipped them off to drab retreats
With minimal amenities,
Ensnaring them with pleasantries
In dismal rooms with umber sheets,

Where, looking out from faded chairs,
They saw the slum the years had made
Of what was once an aspen glade
For Baptist socials, county fairs.

Storms

When days of stormy skies have done their worst,
And river waters rise and levees burst;
When wind and rain have flooded every field
And blackened all the grain and corn they yield;
When men implore their gods as skies grow dark,
And every two-by-four becomes an ark;
When all are lost, diminished by their grief,
And count the cost of storms with disbelief;
When children doubt and wonder how we'll live,
And we're without assurances to give;
When we're bereft of all, except the dross,
And mankind's left to calculate its loss;
We'll shut our eyes against the wind and rain,
And, waking, we'll arise, and build again.

