

The Chambered Cairn

For Anne Lennox

Kilbirnie's kirkyard and the lairs at Largs
muffle their hauntings in the greenest lawn.
A line of houses known as Daisybank
stands by the Garnock, which is not so pure
as it once was, though a gray heron homes there.

And gray your father's cousin, ninety-three.
Alert, rail-thin, stone deaf but talkative,
he sways in his armchair while his bony hands
jab and slice tall tales. His false teeth whistle,
his old eyes water, *whether I laugh or no*.

Gray too your aunt who tholes atop the brae,
mean in poverty, stunted as a child.
The Home Help come in aprons to make tea
and plead with her to leave her moldy walls.
She sits beside her window, judging neighbors.

What makes the old man happy with his lot,
the aunt a limping harpy of complaint,
you do not know, though you would aid them both.
Thinking Ayrshire, speaking American,
you cannot even say where you belong,

the family broken like a chambered cairn
you found on Arran—what's left a mound of grass
and a few skewed stones to mark the burials,
secrets kept from the archeologist.
None lives who can name the dead of that place

with its raided passage aimed at Ailsa Craig.

Pelicans and Greeks

Edward Lear in San Remo, Italy, 1888

Nights when he cannot sleep, Lear looks for paper,
uncertain whether he should sketch or write,
or which of his living friends might comprehend
his travels off the rough and tumble roads.

*As soon as I picked up my pen I felt
I was dying.*

And should he then have married?
On such long nights, lines from the Laureate
chase through his brain like notes flung off the scale—
an infant *with no language but a cry....*

What of Bassaë, the temple on the mountain,
the ancient oaks still stretching out their arms
to sunlight he had tried to catch in oils?
Who owned that painting now? How could one own
the love that lay behind it? All the years
and all the travels must mean little more
than light that dies along the temple flutings.

Laden with lunch, the drawing boards and paints,
Georgis played Sancho Panza to his knight.
Dear Georgis—you who witnessed wonders with me....
Spoken to nothing but an empty room.

*On Crete a black man came, and little boy,
and peasants, and I drew them. They were all
good tempered, laughing. I remember how
the small boy saw my drawing of a donkey
and almost cried and was impelled to give me
lemons as a gift. I gave him a pencil.
A gesture I can't forget, ingenuous
and awkward like the play of pelicans—
the ordinary beauty of the world
that makes one jubilate in sheer delight
and shudder when we feel life leaving us.*

In India an English schoolgirl came
to meet the painter, having memorized
"The Owl and the Pussycat." Such was fame.
And there was Georgis who was mad again
because he could not ride an elephant.
And there were mountains higher than the ones
he loved in Crete and Thessaly. They too
compelled the draughtsman's longing not to lose
minute sensations he had drawn upon,
fleabags and palaces, pelicans and Greeks.

*If no one bought my drawings I should live
on figs in summertime, worms in winter,
with olive trees and onions, a parrot,
yes, and two hedgehogs for companionship,
a painting room with absolute north light....*

So many friends are gone. No partner frets
that he cannot sleep, no child arrives to scold him.
He is the sum of all that he has lost,
his hand still dreaming on the empty page.

Arrows of Herakles

Last night I dreamed the war in which I died
flared in its final orgy of bloodlust,
that heroes I had butchered
were followed by still more,

pouring from the belly of a great beast
and battering down the sleeping city's gates.
I saw myself balled up,
arrows of Herakles

shot through me till I fairly bristled with them,
my vaunted beauty only a grimace now,
my guilt a groaning weight
I dragged toward a temple.

Funny to see it all like that—and you
gone back to duty with your Spartan husband.
 Would you remember me
 with any happiness?

Would you think back through war to summertime
when Love appeared to hold us in her thrall?
 Time before prophecies
 brought warships to the beach...

In August heat, what could we do but strip
and plunge into the bluegreen sea to stare
 like teenagers agog
 at water's underworld?

Or search for shade to rest our waterlogged
and drowsy limbs, stopping our sunburnt ears
 to dull cicada drones
 that sounded disapproval?

At evening, find our bodies cool enough
to touch, to taste the seasalt on your skin
 when I unpinned your chiton
 and you bent down to kiss?

Would you remember that among the living,
your days domestic and responsible,
 husband and daughter near,
 or did you find, my love,

that you embraced a dead man in a dream?
Dying, I heard myself cry out to you
 but no one standing by
 could understand a word.