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**Spenser's Mistress
Gives Her Response**

– “Gather, therefore, the rose
whilst yet is prime, for
soon comes age.”

Spenser, *Faerie Queen*

Consider me that rose
whose blossom, sepal, leaf
will flourish, then decay
(what nurtures, overthrows),
its glory come to grief
as day dispatches day.
Thus roses fade away.

And so, my love, shall I,
though I say yes or no.
What union can defy
(though love would have it so)
the cycles of the sky?
It's only apropos
that roses live to die.

Doorish

– for *Elizabeth Carnazzo*

I.

A rundown Georgian house,
the remnants of a barn,
a stony plot of fallow ground—
it took a Connachtman
to give this place a name,

some farmer, kin of mine,
who ploughed and harrowed here
two hundred years ago or more,
who knew the cradle-makers' skill,
the coffin-builders' art.

II.

I tell the dowager
who gives me tea and cake
I've come to her from far away,
walked miles of country road
to find this humble farm.

She speaks distractedly
of Simpsons, Martins, all
that Church of Ireland crowd
(the rusty kettle she forgot
still steaming on the hob),

the ones who stayed behind,
her relatives and mine,
asleep in country churchyards now,
their graves almost concealed
with sprawling ivy, weeds.

I think of uncles, aunts
who sat on Brooklyn stoops
before the two World Wars and longed
for seed and harvest times
In fields they never saw again.

III.

At dusk I take my leave
of every stick and stone,
of generations island proud,
whose industry made fruitful fields,
replenished fallow ground.

The cradle-makers' heir,
the coffin-builders' kin,
I wander back along the road,
with neither skill nor art to raise
these ruins up again.

A Sighting on the River

I.

That summer morning years ago
we watched a red-tailed hawk
descending from the pines
across the stony riverbed.

O River, wind us now in night.

His talons clutching writhing prey,
his plumage spread against
a shaft of swirling air,
we saw him slowly rise again.

That circling image calls us back
as strangers now, to drift
beneath these trees, this sky,
to wonder where the river leads.

We tie our rotting skiff along
a fringe of wooded shore,
survey the massive sky
for hours for pinions, talons, beak.

II.

A vagrant sun recedes behind
a line of reddened hills.
At dusk, let down and cold,
we slowly row the skiff upstream.

We make our way to camp as night
reclaims the river, pines.
Without a word exchanged,
we pack the old sedan and leave.

We saw a sign among these woods
that morning years ago,
an emblematic bird
abreast of water, earth and sky.

If we can hoard its symmetry
against the whorl of time,
perhaps it was enough
to know that feathered splendor once.

O River, wind us now in night.

On Looking Into a Wedding Album

I.

This shot reveals the room
with pink pastel decor,
the youthful bride and groom.

(In later years they'd mock
that "Diane Arbus" pose,
two gawky kids in shock.)

"The young know how to live,"
the tipling priest declared.
"They have such love to give."

Young lovers never sense
an hour when passion thins,
their love is so intense.

II.

With time her auburn hair
presages gray, his eyes
assume a somber air.

Were we like that? they muse,
who every passing year
have less and less to lose.

They find they've spent their lives
lamenting all that's gone,
neglecting what survives.

Young lovers never dream,
as Heraclitus did,
that life's a shifting stream.

III.

As light began to fade,
they thought of one last shot
along a balustrade.

They stood and waved farewell
to relatives and friends,
intent on some hotel.

Tomorrow loomed ahead,
across those far off hills,
to cherish or to dread.

Whatever lies in store,
young lovers always know
their love's forevermore.

I Am Ó Ciaragaín

Invoking a wrathful God
with icons, beads, candles,
the liturgy of the middle ages,

I am Tomás Ó Ciaragaín,
heir of the dark people,
hardened by famine and plague,

a true descendant of the tribe
that bullied, burned, and killed
in the old blackguard days.

Schooled in the pubs, I can couch
an insult in the guise of praise,
praise in the guise of an insult.

Born in a black hour,
I am Tomás Ó Ciaragaín.
My legacy: a blessing and a curse.

Deceptions

That day at breakfast years ago,
as morning etched the walls
with light, you made me tell my dream.

I stammered out a few details:
the queue of naked figures spread
across an arid plain;

those suppurated sores on flesh,
the moans that filled the air,
as though they were a single voice.

I still recall your eyes, the way
you looked at me, perplexed,
“Was I among that crowd?” you asked.

Someday, perhaps, you’ll read these lines
and know the truth at last—
I lied, of course, I saw us both.

My Father's Keys

He couldn't name a single door
he opened with this set of keys
we came across the year he died.

A son in some old parable,
I clutch them in my hands once more.

He never hoped to see again
those rooms he entered years ago,
except through recollection's eye.

But time, that takes us all to task,
can blur the mind beyond recall.

His memory had lost its way
among those darkened corridors
where all the turnings looked the same.

I think of him again tonight,
with all his songs and laughter stilled,

and clutch them in my hands once more,
these long forgotten artifacts,
these emblems of his passages.

Apparitions on Summer Nights

A faultless logic rules my dreams
and has me, turning twelve again,
climb high among the glowing boughs
of phosphorescent apple trees,
endow equivocating leaves
with wonders, splendors, all
on moonlit summer nights.

I'll never be that boy again,
suspended high among the stars
beneath those godsend moons,
that silver tracery of clouds,
with all the dazzling world beneath,
and apparitions everywhere
I set my drowsy eyes to rest!

Coole Park Revisited

“Among what rushes will they build,
By what lake’s edge or pool
Delight men’s eyes when I awake some day
To find they have flown away?”

– W. B. Yeats, *The Wild Swans at Coole*

I.

“So many lovely things are gone,”
you said, “So many cherished gifts.”

At Coole a famous manor house
played host to genius down the years,

a country’s poets, playwrights, wits,
but blackguard time would pull it down.

Just up the road the Martyn heirs
contrived to lose Tyllira House.

Your winding stair at Ballylee
is empty save for tourists now.

II.

Returning to these Seven Woods,
I seek no ruined Georgian grace.

I come to find those wheeling swans
that splash and dive across the lake,

the heirs of those you ventured once
were emblems of the human soul.

What’s lost, preserved in years to come
no one can ever prophecy.

What made you think you’d see the day
their kind would ever fly away!

– *Galway 2003*