

WHISTLING IN THE DARK

by **Rose Mary Boehm**

All That Remains

A murmur of atoms
taking off in graceful denial
of their former bonds.

Résumé

I was born to oils on canvas.
Mother was one of the whores of Ferrer-St. Denis,
painter of nineteenth Century Paris nights.
When I fell out of the womb I must have broken.
I am a hunchback. My father,
obsessed with women and paint,
tried to kill me with a palette knife.
My mother fled the studio,
leaving behind the afterbirth and
one shoe.

What regrets I have are not for my untimely
and unseemly birth, but for my genius.
When that knife nicked my baby skin,
oil paint and turpentine entered my veins.
There is nothing I can't paint. I smell the colours
and feel the lines in my belly. I rise in ecstasy
on light and shade, on this daub of red (the life-giver),
or a brilliant white (the lace maker), or a multitude
of greens the origins of which I've never seen.

One day my mother forgot me somewhere.
I was picked up by the wife of a mediocre
painter who soon made it to fame
and wealth. Put me to work when I was five.
Art historians everywhere sing his genius.

Philemon and Baucis

Snow on the iced-up steps
bits of slate broken,
a frozen rabbit skin dangled
from a hook near the door.
*Come in, come in, you can't
stay out there. This weather
is meant for bears
and even they are hibernating.*

Snow piled high at the back
cutting the light, frosted glass
with elaborate designs. A fire
in the open grate. She buzzed
about the small kitchen
excitedly wiping her hands
on her apron. A mug full
of steaming coffee.

*Dad, come and see what
the storm brought in.* A big
old man bent under the arch
when he entered the kitchen
from the other room.
He chewed and smiled
and sharpened his axe.

All Hallows' Eve

This moon is rough around
the edges.
It's a humble tumble fumble moon.

Santa Muerte.
Dance of those who know.
Who've been.
Samhain.

Beat the rhythm with the bones. Bring
back the cattle.
Lawter.
Day of slaughter.

Santa Muerte, the night walker stalker
out
about.

Sindhe doors.
Light the good fires.
Set a table for dead kin.
Prepare the barn.

Black clouds obscure the gallows
hallows
holy be your offering.

Smoke soak my skin,
ablute, restitute, retribute.

The Night He Stopped Being a Boy

He stands for a while,
hands in his pockets,
touching the secrete stone
from the midnight pond
under the rain trees.

His cap pushed to the back
of his head, stubborn stubble
brushes up from his scalp.
His trousers reach almost
to his knees, his shoes
sturdy, his imagination
limitless, his fear palpable.

Testing himself against trees,
ferns, undergrowth, night birds,
rustlings, and all things that wait
behind the dense shrubs
to taste his flesh.

He is not at all sure
he'll see his mother ever
again, but he knows that
something is watching.

Waterways

The green girl waited at the pier.
Hovered around the black pylons,
wet and rotting, lashed by the waves,
painted in abstracts
by sea moss.

Fernando pushed out his boat.
Young, brown, muscular and carefree.
The birds screeched in anticipation
of his return. Sea lions pretended
not to notice. Nets neatly rolled,
ready for an early winter catch.
Oil lamp in the bow.

She slid into the *lancha*. Undulated,
coiled beneath the tackle. Weeks later
they found him washed up on the beach
near turtle rock, a smile on his blue lips.

Dover to Canterbury

We'll soon pass the spot where I
see her every time. Not once has she missed.
Started to call her Emma.

The rain whips against
smeared windows. I strain
to peer into the night.

Perhaps she had bathed in
the arrogance of wealth,
the handsomeness of knowing
her place. Couldn't have been
more than about twenty-five.

One day I ask in the pub.
Drive to the estate.
The manor and grounds hidden
behind a gnarled, leafless overgrowth.
Scale the crumbling wall.

An anemic light from a dying
autumn moon haloes a woman. I follow.
Her long hair barely catches the weak light.

Her white gown billowing in the breeze
she hovers near the train lines.
Sparks spew into thick black.

A locomotive riots closer and bucks
when brakes screech it to a sudden
halt. In glowing white a woman
lies under the unforgiving wheels.

I tried to rescue her one hundred years
too late. But she knew I was watching.

Epilogue Found in the Diaries of the Widow Rochester

(Jane Eyre by Charlotte Brontë)

Yes, reader, I married him.

A short while after our son was born
his obsessions began, and I recognized
his first wife's despair. Edward, even though
no longer completely blind, did not ever fully regain
his sight and distrusted the world and me.

My marriage became darker and darker
until I reverted to calling him 'Mr. Rochester'.
At moments it was as though a beam of sunlight
filtered through the curtains of foreboding
and I would take heart, only to be plunged
once more into the deepest gloom. One starless
night Mr Rochester fell off his horse and broke
his neck. Since then guilt has been my companion
and melancholy covers me like a heavy blanket.

Still, I can hear my children playing under the trees.
Occasional laughter drifts my way. We are blessed.

Another Mermaid Story

A small, brown village
on the Cornish coast.
Ruby married Fred.
She'd had enough of filing
in the 'Museum for Fishing and Smuggling'.
Fred liked Ruby because she was round
and sleek as a seal.
A slight scent of ocean
hovered over her skin.

Ravenous triplets sucked her dry.
In the supermarket she pushed
a tank with three activated
missiles from aisle to aisle.

Ruby soon neglected them.
Preferred to watch
the silvery catches
in the harbour.

Fred hired a nanny. Took to her.
Ruby took to the fishermen.
Both grew into the comfortable
co-existence of mutual dislike.

Ruby disappeared.
Fred drank her health.
In the bar that night a fisherman
mentioned that he'd seen a selky
swim out into the Celtic Sea.

Sister Emilia

She'd herself danced with the devil.
So she said.
Over and over again.
When she pulpiterated about Lucifer
a wistful smile seemed to weave itself into her
face, even gentled that huge hooked nose.
Made the rimless glasses sparkle.

On Sundays she wore a frozen smile.
The wolf ingratiating himself to that little
lonely girl in the woods, his head covered
by a starched, white coif.
Leaving room for the ears.
Under his chin the big white bow.

Sin, sinner, sinnest.
A basket full of gluttony.
Lipsticks made from damnation.
Lust, iniquity, transgression, sloth.
Wrath.

Snow White and seven castrated dwarfs.
Virgins are eaten by dragons.
King Kong the gentle, imprisoned and
exhibited, prodded and cut.
Edification.

Hallelujah.
In the name of the Lord.
When Sister Emilia stopped preaching,
her face bathed in holy sweat and zealotry,
I imagined how she once took money before the service.

Sunday School

He said it would be our secret.
When he touched me there
it hurt and made me feel
like when Josh and I played doctors
behind the tool shed.
And he said it was God's will;
because that's what girls are made for
and who best but him to teach
me how to pray in the right position.
When he pulled down my knickers
he said he just wanted to see
whether the devil
had already made himself at home.

The Signs Were Here All Along

Weak light, black earth frozen
hard. Pale days during which
the birds lost their voices, not daring
to give away their positions, lest
they too would suffer the blight.
Lines undefined, dull mornings
eating their advance through
the dim undergrowth, aimless
living bows at breaking point.
My boots find no purchase,
the ground iced suddenly,
my ankles fold more than once.
I can't break the fall, my body
slides forward, I don't trust my eyes,
but my hands bless the impossible; hidden
under the briars unfolds an act of faith
and sheer perseverance: the first
snowdrops pushing out of the frozen
womb, insisting it's their time.

Fishing

We pretended to fish
with first morning light,
the waking leaves
and early birds, the stillness
of Dutch waters.
Jumping fish
startled us.

Your call conjured up
damaged enchantments.

I have this space
deep inside. Something
buried alive,
still writhing
when dawn breaks
an unquiet night.

Though you got old,
you knew
that we'd been lovers.
The strain in your voice
told me you remembered.

clandestine

meet me at the old
victoria station hotel
make it eleven.

hookers, lovers, trains
pass sooty windows

don't bring luggage
just remember
how I loved you
last winter in Antwerp.

your wet skin reflects
the almost light
under these high ceilings,
bent venetian blinds hide
curtains torn by time,
the station clock
has no mercy.