

Five Poems

From

The Champion of Doubt

poems

by

Tom Driscoll

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Five *from* The Champion of Doubt

Birches

The Clarity of Water

Hold your tongue

The Rakes

Always Sunday

Birches

Three birches, one stands apart
leans away, seeming about to fall
—this at the edge of a narrow stand
of woods, oak mostly;

the birches' black markings
at this distance in the misty light
distracted sketches of some dreaming artist;
papery bark peeling in places—
the pencil shavings.

My father once told me how birches were known
as “sentries of the forest” as they had this habit
of appearing at the edge of a deeper woods,
spare, pale, as if keeping watch.

They were a frail species, he said, their health
bespoke that of the forest they supposedly guarded.
It was something of the soil, their tendency towards light.

Delicate witnesses, they'd fail first as a warning.

The Clarity of Water

*after Gregory Orr
for my uncle, John Carey*

*To dream of them without trouble
would be to not dream of them at all.*

1 BORN OUT OF WATER

The body is smooth, slender, luminous,
perfect —so pale bright. It could be carved
from marble, so still as it lay there.
The man's head is turned to one side.

The boy is shaken by this vision,
its searing light, his sudden place
as witness to what he knows
no one wants him to see.

In years to come he will recall
the moment so many times
he'll start to believe this was the day
he arrived within his own body, crawled
up inside to watch the world through its eyes.

2

Two young boys and their uncle
swim by a floating dock.
The uncle believes he guards the young swimmers
and the boys tell themselves *they* are watching *him*.
First three voices ring off the pond's shimmering surface
—patina green, flashes of white.

Then the one boy's panicked scream
calling the uncle's name three times, then silence,
then he calls it out once more, differently.

3

I stand in the shallow water by the pond edge.
Small translucent fishes dart in around
my feet. Within their shadows, cast
on the gravelly bottom, are other shadows.

These are like fish dreams of other fishes
no one sees but me.

4 THE WATER

“Out beyond the dock
Pond weed was grown in thick
at the edge of deeper water.
Thank god he was as pale as he was,
his Irish skin, years of working nights,
sleeping most days—he was white
and bright as a bone
just settling into the dark bottom
as I found him that last time I dived.
I doubt I could have gone one more.
And your mother, she was no swimmer.
I remember she'd walked out as far as she could,
the water up to her chin she stretched out her hand.
It was the last I had left when our fingertips touched.
Christ, his body was cold. I had him under one arm.”

There is another version of this life
where he was not injured as a child, his damaged brain
is whole, he is not subject to the seizures
that always came, as if to torture him, worst when he
tried again and again to learn to read.
His face isn't scarred.

He tells me that I should come meet his son,
that we would be —*thick as thieves*.

6 BREATH

There are nights I pray for you even though
I haven't your faith —I know there are worse things
than being mistaken. Clear water spills from your mouth
as they turn your face to one side and work
your, for the moment, lifeless body.
My father presses a kiss to your lips.
Then that first breath,
your stone body's slightest answer.

7. THE COLOR OF LIGHT

The summer I was seven years old, Norman's camp
on Curlew Pond, it was time I should learn to swim.
I'd been told never go in less than twenty minutes
after eating. The pond was deep, fed by cold springs
and it frightened me.
And so
I ate almost all the time, watched my brothers swim
from a distance, the shaded cabin ashore.

Fifty years and I still remember the sight of his scarred and swollen nose
disfigured, dark purple —side effect of the medication
he'd had to take his whole life.
We'd all learned to look away and not remind him.
That day in a pool of panic and sunlight it was the only color for miles.

Hold your tongue

The silence 'd suit him better—
better than anything you might
think to say:

complaint —the dry scrape
of noise and nuisance—pointless.

Didn't he teach you that
in the long run, that silence
could be as cutting?

Let others announce pride and rage
and sing
—what he had seen
and we never quite learned, what
marked him, seared and scarred him

closed his lips
with its burning kiss.

Hold your tongue and mind the fire.

The Rakes

Words are about as useless as memories
after all —ah, but remember

—you small enough I could pick you up
off the floor, how I'd start out humming
'The Rakes of Mallow' —that was the signal.
You knew it was time and folded yourself
into shape for the carrying.
I'd take you up, up the narrow wooden stair
to your bed—beery breath and beard stubble
the sharp caress to bless your sleep.

“Goodnight, sweet prince, may flights of angels
guide thee to thy rest.”
I said that each time, as much to myself as you,
something between a joke and a prayer.
As I think of it now, it's that other Shakespearean
line that's telling—that one where “—the rest is silence.”

It's about that silence, son,
what's taken you these years to forgive.
We both know it's not there weren't things
left to say; just that words would not say them.

For all the love of language, there was nothing fit
to ask your blessing.
I only stood from that last good kitchen chair,
even as you told me to sit, sit —you were leaving
but would come again tomorrow
tomorrow.

I crossed the room and I took your hand.
It didn't matter then that you did not understand

and I don't know that it matters now
—whether or not.


There is still nothing but time
and no man ever need say more than his prayers.

Always Sunday

Church bells ring. It is that Always Sunday;
back from the bakery up town, the walk
past habit and practice, rite and the race
of Catholics to their large cars.

The century is still beginning, requisite war underway;
home and the house is quiet, its structure low and aching
at its open earth cellar of loose stone and the dark
where the coal was once kept. To the mind of most
neighbors, and despite their kind wishes, we still live
in the murderer's house. They refer to the place
with his name and not ours. They do not know
how the smells of coffee and bacon and toasted bread
rise up to find our children sleeping, adream in the wild nests
we've allowed them. I'll soon call from the foot of that narrow
stair, painted an odd and gorgeous plum color, one cracked
tread mid-flight. I will warn them I am starting the eggs.

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About

The Champion of Doubt

These poems pay attention to what it means to be the citizen of a troubled country, the son of warring and loving parents, a devoted brother, a husband and father. The collection sifts and sorts through differing memories, places in time, senses of history and identity.

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"Driscoll's lyrical ear, and dowser's alertness to strong currents of feeling, as well as to meaning, provides deep pleasure in poem after poem. A collection well-worth owning and returning to."

Alan Feldman, Author of *The Golden Coin*

"In the lead poem [Tom Driscoll] writes about birches, "sentries of the forest" and "their tendency towards light" as "delicate witnesses." Tom is a birch, and this is a brave and wonderful book."

Polly Brown, Author of *Pebble Leaf Feather Knife*

"These are poems that move a reader to look deeply into their own mirror of loss and regret, hard lessons learned, and moments of pleasure and triumph that in spite of everything emerge like dandelions poking through the pavement. Filled with images and insights that seem both startling and inevitable..."

Charles Coe, Author of *Memento Mori*

For in-person events, readings, and other opportunities, contact Tom Driscoll directly

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