

Poetry Series

Kerry O'Connor

- poems -

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1 - Under a Baobab Tree

I want to set my school desk
Under a baobab tree
And teach to the wind and the rain.
Let the red dust turn to the rich mud
Of which Adam was made
And run in rivulets around my ankles.
I want to give instruction to the warm
Fat waterdrops of summer
And listen to the recited lesson
Of the thunderheads,
Rumbling in baritone unison.
Let the wind take me up and fling me
Through zigzags of cold lightning -
I will take out my red pen and
Award points for creativity.
Patiently, I'll invigilate while matriculant
Hailstones write their final exams
On the physics of gravity and
The freezing point of water.
When the storm of learning has passed me by,
I will gather up the fallen paper leaves
And all the pencil twigs into my briefcase,
And walk home under a blue sky
Washed clean as a blackboard,
My dusters hung out to dry.

Kerry O'Connor

2 - Lesson under a tree

Little desks wait in neat rows
under the baobab tree.
The teacher recites William Blake
and wonders how to describe
a 'charter'd street' to children
of the dusty bushveld
or even why she would want to
when there is a spitting cobra
wound tightly around each ankle
and a crazy-eyed chameleon
on her shoulder.
Nearby, a meerkat sits up straighter
to learn about iambic pentameter
and a vulture circles on high,
keeping a watchful eye on
the sleeping scholar who has
thrown his book aside
and rested his weary head
on a leopard's spotted flank.
A fish eagle swoops down
with a long haunting cry,
carrying away her notes
to peck over at leisure.
Termites have found her desk
and gnawed away at
all her English culture
but after the lesson
she will sip tea from a porcelain cup
and grade their papers to see how well
they recall the rules of a language
from beyond their tree.

Kerry O'Connor

3 - Under a Twisted Tree

This tree is leafless, bare,
A skeletal perch for vultures and crows.
The earth beneath is hard-packed
By the flip-flopped feet which run
Each morning to the tattered
Green tarpaulin and broken black-board:
An outdoor classroom for refugees.

The plastic shoes are shed like the petals
Of a foreign flower,
As the orphans of Darfur sit cross-legged
On the dusty groundcover
And the teacher begins his lesson.

So many children. So many
Ankle bones, knee bones,
Back bones, skulls –
Tattered shirts, torn skirts
And gaily-coloured scarves
To modestly veil their heads.

One little girl has a pencil and
A single sheet of paper;
Her fingers are poised to follow
The line of chalk.
A boy stands with raised hand,
An empty bowl clutched to his side.
The teacher's back is turned
As he scratches a problem
On the board: $3 + 4 =$
Hands shoot into the air.

But can anyone figure out
The sum of starvation?
Why does displacement plus
Poverty equal an appetite
For knowledge?
Even in hungry corners
Of Africa,
Children go to school
To learn their lessons
Under a twisted tree.

Kerry O'Connor

A Fragment

I awake to a strawberry milkshake sky;
The rising sun floats like a crimson cherry
In the frothy dregs of dawn.

Kerry O'Connor

A Wide Amber Sky

When African cows come home,
They come home under a wide amber sky.
Over their rusty-red heads and curved white horns,
The raucous ibis fly,
Scissoring the indigo clouds to ragged shreds
With their scimitar beaks and sharp-edged wings,
As the sun balances
Crimson-bright on the dissolving edge of distant mountains.
The cow-herds whistle shrilly and scuff bare-footed
In the wake of the herd,
Whipping the stubborn rumps with broken sticks.
Tall, blonde stems of grass sigh as the beasts pass
Between the stone-ringed graves under the thorn trees
And come, at last, to the ancestral kraal.

Kerry O'Connor

A Work of Art

"Run naked through the green grass, " he said
And I liked the image it left in my head.
I wriggle my toes in soggy turf
But dare I bare all to the sky and the earth?

"Hug a tree; stop reading books."
I replied to this with quizzical looks.
I love my trees, both bark and leaves
But it's been a while since they've felt my sleeves.

"Now don't forget to stare at clouds."
My rejoinder was quick and proud:
I listen to clouds on rainy days
And admire their hues of purple and grey.

"Then roll over and count the ants..."
A notion in my mind he plants:
All beauty is in the smallest part
And a poem can be a work of art.

Kerry O'Connor

African Light

The African sun is soft on stone
And hard on water.
It glides like golden silk
Over the skin of rock
But burnishes the silver
Plate of lakes 'til it blinds
The eye with diamond light.

The African moon turns stone to steel,
Grimly cold and grey as bone
But its platinum light turns water
into a cloak of black brocade
About the shoulder of the night.

Kerry O'Connor

At the Waterhole

It is crowded
At the waterhole tonight –
The muddy shadows of buffalo
Leave a trail of blundering prints;
The lions in their pride, hunker down,
Lapping with velvet tongues between golden paws.
Even the straight-lipped python,
Patterned with fallen leaves, sips slowly.
Soon a herd of smarmy politicians
Comes swaggering out the bush;
A crooked policeman shoulders
A crocodile out of his way and slops
In the mud beside a rapist, out on parole.
A bureaucrat sells fake IDs
To a flock of under-aged flamingos
Flaunting their candy feathers at the hyena boys
As darkness falls.

Kerry O'Connor

Dividing Point, August 2009

Spring came back but I was gone,
Snowdropp shook a tentative bell –
All was silent in my heart –
Ringing out that all was well.
Spring came back but I was gone.

A smoky fire scrawled in the air,
A message clear from me to you –
Burnt away, ashen grey, my heart –
The signs all say my love was true.
A smoky fire scrawled in the air.

The moon was full in the Eastern sky,
A Trojan shield burnished bright –
You slashed your sword across my heart –
Before the battle, I lost the fight.
The moon was full in the Eastern sky.

Spring came back but you did not,
Swallows flew in from the desert North –
Love lies abandoned in my heart –
Sickle-wing'd, fork-tail'd, they all set forth.
Spring came back but you did not.

Kerry O'Connor

Feeble fires, Cold hands

Beside the red-walled hut
Stands a black bull
Chewing the sloppy cud
Of bovine indifference
As the dark-skinned man
Gathers brittle sticks to feed
The feeble fire that cannot
Dispel the cold of bush winter.

As tourists dash by in 4X4s
Seeking the thrill of the 'Big Five',
They chomp on their beefy burgers
With human indifference to the plight
Of the skinny child who holds out
Her threadbare hands, offering
The bitterness of sweet oranges
For a few cold coins.

Kerry O'Connor

Frozen to the Bone

Death is the uninvited guest
Who knocks peremptorily
At your front door,
Demanding you let him in.
Stand aside, incline your head
Feel the chill as he walks by –
Know that when he leaves
It will not be alone.
One of you must go,
Sometimes with a sigh or a word,
Often without a kiss or farewell.
The unwelcome visitor
Always leaves quietly,
Without shutting the door
Behind him, and the lonely wind
Blows through the empty
Spaces in your heart
Freezing you to the bone.

Kerry O'Connor

Masters of their Element

I looked out a window today
and saw four crows tumble through
the cloudless sky
like ragged scraps of darkest night.
All claws and brutal beaks
they scrambled for supremacy,
masters of their element.

Some men master the element
of poetry, allowing their words
to spill like blood
across the white page.
They assign the black crows
to pick through the entrails
of their exhumed loves and
tumble through the blue skies
of their broken promises.

Kerry O'Connor

Namib

Desert sands shift and change
In a picture of singularity.
The earth cries white sand;
It bleeds red dust;
It dies in rocky chunks.

White hands, bare bones, claw
At the sky, which mocks
With cobalt indifference,
The wordless appeal.

The lament of the desert
Is borne on the wind:
All sorrow is blown away -
Terror is swept up -
And spangled darkness
Enfolds the wasteland like a pall.

Kerry O'Connor

Not a Love Poem

This is a love poem
To nobody,
An ode to neither blue eyes
Or green.
'Tis not a lament
For loss of a favoured smile
Or frown,
Nor a sonnet to describe a
Stolen kiss.
This is a poem about sunshine,
Lambent light,
The golden beam that falls glowing
On shoulders
And illuminates the curve of neck
And cheek.
It is a lyric written for the touch
Of warmth
Sliding down an arm to kiss
White skin
Of the inner wrist before saying
Goodbye for good.

Kerry O'Connor

On My Birthday

Jacaranda pods clonk on the iron roof
Painted peacock-blue before the African sun
Peeled it away with sharp-edged fingernails.
But this morning, the sunlight is tangerine.
It stains the grey dawn through trailing
Branches of the silver-green bottlebrush tree
Where a yellow-bellied bird sips at red flowers.
A marmalade cat cleans a dew-drenched paw
And the lonesome dog-next-door howls
While the pale, gibbous moon dissolves into blue.

Kerry O'Connor

P.S.

You can say
You love me, you know,
Without fear
I'll make plans to shack up
With you
And live entirely
On strawberries and cream.
Love is not a debt
To be paid off at the end of the month
When your salary comes in.
(Nor is a love letter
An IOU.)
An admission of love isn't like
An admission of guilt before you pay that traffic fine
Nor is it a taxable commodity...
"I love you" does not up the ante
In a poker game;
Love is not a game one plays to win or lose,
With bets placed on the side.
Love is a simple thing,
An energy that is neither created nor destroyed
And I wonder how long it's going
To take you to figure this out
Yourself.

Kerry O'Connor

Search for Beauty

I search for Beauty everywhere:
 Beyond the pane, a sunbird -
 I have heard
A shrill song, sweet and strong
 Like a dream recurred
I wait for Beauty's glimmer:
Flashing green shimmer.

Life teaches us to face despair:
 A dusk without hope of light
 Dismal sight -
'Til the star shines afar
 And kestrels take flight
High above our village spires
Sweeping in wide gyres.

When my day seems dull and endless,
 My spirit wearily old:
 Heart of gold,
Halo bright, creamy white -
 Narcissus blooms bold
Lifting a poised, fragile face
Of eternal Grace.

Kerry O'Connor

Sorrow at Twilight

The sorrows of twilight
Descend as lightly as
Cotton sheets
Spread on the grass to dry.
Melancholy lies down
Beside me
Like a shaggy grey dog
And licks my hand
With the soft tongue
Of rueful placation.
The pearly sky sheds
Pink rose petals in the West
Like sad flowers
Forgotten beside a gravestone
And the rose-grey pigeon
Sobs in her sleep.
Dusky night pulls up the
Silken covers
And the world rolls over
While I wait for
Insomnia to come to bed
Like an old lover
And hold my hand till
Dawn.

Kerry O'Connor

Sunbirds

Sunbirds,
Wearing the verdigris helmets
Of long-buried conquistadors,
Breasts vanilla-feathered,
Song honey-sweet,
Hang
Upside down to sip from aloes.

Kerry O'Connor

Sunday Road

The road I travelled
On Sunday
Is a broad line
Etched curvaceously in charcoal
Over the grasslands,
Saffron upon powdery mustard
Washing against the
Cinnamon hills.

It seems like an artist
Has dipped his thumb in
Purple paint
And sketched the distant mountains
Against the blue canvas
Of sky.

A solitary vulture,
Ruffled in grey, drew a
Lazy spiral
In the space above my head –
An outstretched hand might
Have gained hold of its
Watery shadow.

I wished for warm
Red wine
Sipped straight from the bottle.
Such days as these
Linger in the mind like
The words of
Fading song.

Kerry O'Connor

The sweetest kiss

The sweetest kiss
I ever got
was given to
Me
in a dream.
My ephemeral lover
pressed his warm
lips
to the blade of
my left shoulder.
Alone
I awoke on
the cold side
of the bed,
lying in the
Ashes
of a burnt-out love.
Now
I carry that
kiss
like a tattoo
on my skin,
lost in a dream,
Always
searching for the
one thing
that doesn't
Exist.

Kerry O'Connor

Winter Days

It's Winter.
The grass is dry and crisp;
It crunches beneath my feet
Like forgotten potato chips.
The empty peanut shells
Of wind-bitten leaves
Lie discarded in heaps,
Swept into lost corners.
The sky presses low,
Cool and grey –
This is the Winter
Of my days alone.
The chill creeps into my bones;
It groans and grinds me
To dust – 'til the wind
Blows me away.

Kerry O'Connor

Yellow Grass

We lie down together
In a sea of yellow grass.

I take one deep breath
And sink beneath the surface.

I am anchored to your body
By our arms' embrace.

Your skin gleams like a pearl.

One breath –
I am washed away
On a dark purple tide.

Kerry O'Connor