

Three Poems · *Robert Dana*

FOR SISTER MARY APOLLINE

'How good,' he thinks, 'that she breathes in oblivion with every breath she draws! That in childhood each night is a deep gulf between one day and the next.'

Thomas Mann, "Disorder and Early Sorrow"

I

Now, wrangling bells discipline the day
And the doves, in frenetic scramble, flee
Their steeples. I watch them blown like debris
Over the wind-tormented roofs of town.
On the schoolgrounds, amid children hot for play,
Sisters stroll. You, my sister, hands
A-clapping, scold a wild disorder down.
One small boy meets your challenge eye
To eye. Who knows from that tall glance
What bells may ring, and what doves fly?

II

When I called "Sister" half the convent turned
And smiled; children touched my blues,
Awed by the bells that swung above my shoes.
I paused, a stranger, in the scuffled dust.
This is a child's world. Here, where love is learned,
You turn to gamy ends these endless days;
Meg jumps rope and only Bob who's lost
His ball knows the size and shape of grief.
You ran to me and we embraced. In your gaze
I saw the season, blossom, blade, and leaf.

III

Sister, we share no common heritage.
A son who does not wear his father's name,
My birth engendered all; the public shame
That rattled mother screwloose in her bed;
Your father, shattering in his rage
The sideboard glass, the radio, and the clock;
Your trembling prayers, and your bowed head.
Above my crib dry birds of paper twirled,
And I, startled by the sounds, the shock,
Woke weeping in the dark and adult world.

IV

When, at seventeen, you took the veil,
I walked and whistled in a Berkshire wood;
As small boys sometimes can, I understood.
Where Christ, half frozen, legs like sticks,
Hangs in some convent shrine by a rusty nail,
You pray our sins away and ask for grace
And bruise your knees upon the winter bricks.
I am the State's child, now. Being alone
Is something I know better than my face.
The path I walk leads everywhere but home.

V

In those islands of the wise, the Solomons,
The sea salutes the exile. It's Christmas eve;
Drunk as lords, the port side dreams of leave
Tonight, and we, our tin cups full of Scotch,
Drink the bloody health of all men's sons.
We carol out of time and out of tune.
Forward, the bos'n bells the starboard watch,
And half the night we watch gulls wheel and flee
Our threatening shape across the moon,
Down the never and forever changing sea.

VI

Now, day's last light dies in the pebbled yard,
And the manic winds of March betray the season.
We stop and listen. The bells, sound without reason,
Summon the sailor seaward, the nun to prayer.
Where there is time, time is its own reward.
We say goodbye. I turn and go, but stay
Fixed forever in your parting stare.
Eastward, the darkness that the doves are bringing;
But in the street, a boy prolongs his play,
Now murmuring to himself, now softly singing.

Now

You come over a hill, suddenly,
late afternoon or early evening
on 6A to Beach Point. Provincetown
to Long Point Light, a yellow,
dissolving Venice by Whistler
or Monet. Bay flat. Silver
grey. Dark blue further out.
I'm not talking about the past.
I'm talking about my sister,
my wife, myself, — all of us
travelling without reservations.
I'm talking about three small
sails tacked on the far horizon.
At Shoreline Village, cabins
1930's, sixty bucks a night
and twenty yards from salt water,
my sister talks about shells.
Sister Whine. Sister Twinkle.
Fifty years a nun this spring
and all No to my Yes. A taste
for dull food, and expensive
Irish whiskey in her tea. Next