
POETRY

KATHERINE HOSKINS

Selected and Introduced by Anthony Hecht

If I were still teaching graduate students in modern English and American poetry and had assigned to me an especially gifted student, widely conversant with the whole rich canon from, say, Chaucer right up to the last minute, a student who was enthusiastic, willing to work, imaginative, painstaking, and keenly sensitive to poetic nuance, I think I could do him or her no greater favor than to suggest a careful poem-by-poem commentary on the poems of Katherine Hoskins. It would doubtless prove a demanding task, but the rewards would be incalculable if it were to eventuate in a publishable book of solid critical appreciation, for it might restore her to the notice she has deserved from the first, and was hers only in the view of the best of her fellow poets. Think, if you can, of another modern poet who won the enthusiastic praise of the likes of Robert Lowell, Randall Jarrell, William Meredith, James Dickey, and Theodore Roethke, and is, in spite of this, quite simply unknown and out of print. It is a fate feared by Keats himself, to whom Hoskins bears certain touching and quirky resemblances.

To be sure, she did not court public notice. The books of her work that I own, three in number, are at pains to reveal nothing whatever about her except that she lived in Weston, Massachusetts. Nary a word about her family, nor her education, though it might be inferred that if she were an autodidact (as some very good poets have been) she did a first-rate job. I was able, however, to glean some facts from her publisher. Katherine DeMontalont Hoskins was born May 25, 1909, at Indian Head, Maryland, where her father was inspector at the naval proving ground, and was later to retire as rear admiral. Although she did not attend school until the age of 11, she graduated from the Smith College Honors Program in its Class of 1931. Five years later, she married Albert Hoskins, an officer of the Boston Municipal Court. They made their home in Weston, and had one child, a daughter. Hoskins was awarded the Brandeis University Creative Arts Poetry Grant in 1957 and a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1958. She died a widow, after a stoic battle with esophageal carcinoma, in 1988.

Reading through her poems, one is aware of literary allusions, influences, and sympathies that cover an enormous range and include a great deal of 16th- and 17th-century English poetry, as well as Chekhov, Faulkner, Marianne Moore, Dickinson, the very best and earliest children's literature, folklore, and fairy tales, Renaissance painting and sculpture, geography and cartography, American and European history, Gerard Manley Hopkins, and a keen love of the qualities and properties of the natural world, linked, often enough, to a thoughtful capacity for allegory and moral reflection.

Her poems, moreover, make no glib concessions to lazy readers. Her syn-

tax is gnarled (though far from uncomely); her stanzaic forms as complex, at times, as those of the most intricate metaphysical poems, exhibiting something like the same density and compression. They also display a ventriloquist's capacity to shift within the body of a poem from the adopted diction, or noble accents, of the great Renaissance poets to local and regional dialect. She is a woman of many voices, all of them superbly tuned to achieve her wiliest effects.

Take, for example, the opening of a poem that, by the time its mere three stanzas close, has shown us the horrifying tableau of a woman (clearly a black woman) cradling in her arms a man who has been beaten to death, and whose head now is only " 'a sack of little bones.' " The poem is called "After the Late Lynching." (The asterisks, my own, are explained below.)

No,
It goes not liquidly for any of us.*
 Yseult
 's as hard as Troilus.
Heloise is far away and
 Difficult.
Nor's Death felicitous.*
Not princes' proud defiant trumpets,
Not good men's easyness
With Death is not ours yet*

This elaborate stanza is faithfully repeated (though with approximate rhymes later on) throughout. Its tone is seemingly wry and disenchanting. It speaks of the old juxtaposition of Love and Death, and it does so by deliberate literary allusion. Yseult is given her medieval (not her Wagnerian) name to insist upon the antiquity of the conflict in which she played a part. Troilus and Heloise are both "far away and/ Difficult." It all seems artificial, legendary, highly literary in the most removed sense, and the poet knows exactly what she's doing.

But in addition to those famous names, there are also allusions in the lines I've starred with asterisks. The first is to a poem ("Philomela") by John Crowe Ransom, which I had occasion to comment on recently in these pages [*WQ*, Spring '94]. The allusion is important here. Philomela, too, was a victim of love and rape; she too was an ancient figure. In Ransom's poem we, in our modern era, are hopelessly severed from the grandeur of music and of tragedy that her story and her song as a nightingale represent. There has been for Ransom, as for Hoskins, a crude and degenerate falling away from an earlier loveliness, though with no diminution of the world's horror.

The second starred line is meant to recall the dying words of Hamlet, who says to Horatio, "If thou didst ever hold me in thy heart,/ Absent thee from felicity a while,/ And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain,/ To tell my story." There is brilliant irony at work here. For Hamlet, death may seem felicity because life is repellent; for Hoskins, the death she is about to describe is almost too hideous to believe.

Finally, the third starred phrase concerns the death of good men as conceived by John Donne in a poem called "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning."

The very title suggests its relevance to Hoskins's purpose. And her spelling of "easyness" is meant, once again, to confer the burnish of antiquity. Donne opens his poem thus:

As virtuous men pass mildly away,
And whisper to their souls, to go,
Whilst some of their sad friends do say,
The breath goes now, and some say, no. . . .

The serene tranquility Donne allows to those who have a clean and untroubled conscience at the hour of death is, again, opposed by Hoskins to what is found in the world we moderns inhabit. The richness and ramifications of all her allusions serve as substructure and solid foundation for the modern horror she is ruthlessly planning to expose.

Readers properly equipped to get the most of Katherine Hoskins's poems will come upon her splendid "To Apollo Musagetes" (Apollo as leader of the Muses) and will find themselves compelled to think of Yeats's "The Circus Animals' Desertion," Coleridge's "Work Without Hope," Robert Lowell's "Epilogue" to his last book, and, finally, of Keats's self-composed epitaph: "Here lies one whose name was writ in water."

A Merry Meeting

Allemagna? She offers the store with the candy.
He reaches and, Ah! *Allemagna* has recognized.
And how deeply, magnificently blue the sky
Is over Milano, Via Manzoni.

And they are hand in hand, laughing like lovers.
Cinema handsome, they laugh, peering through louvers
At those sleek seals, the Milanese,
Balancing circus-colored cakes and candies.

Leaves pattern plaster—Via Marco di Marchi.
Then he, with affectionate ado,
Goes back to his Piétà, she to the zoo.
Great Milano—villaged by her stranieri.

He takes a sweet and clapboards close around
Them once again—they somewhat breath-bound
Still from when they wandered Milano together
For thirty seconds, and were lovers.

After the Late Lynching

No,
It goes not liquidly for any of us.
 Yseult
 's as hard as Troilus.
Heloise is far away and
 Difficult.
Nor's Death felicitous.
Not princes' proud defiant trumpets,
Not good men's easyness
With Death is not ours yet

Whose lives construe so little of what is brave.
 Grace notes
Should not be asked of slaves.
Slaves' is, lunk-dumb and mutinous,
 At whipping posts
To crouch and whine till they've
Spelled out the primitive construction—
 So plain, so difficult—
Of a death and a woman.

Nor not from whitest light of foreign poems
 Hope help;
 But from her native woe
Who took that black head in her hands
 And felt,
 "A sack of little bones";
Whose arms for the last time round him knew,
 "All down one side no ribs
 But broken things that moved."

For Tazio

The royal quality
Of this child's beauty
Gives me who wait on him
Such inordinate pleasure
As, from Rome to Delft,
Those painters must have felt
Who drew so close to nature
The nature of cherubim

At Giuffre's "Harbor View"

Called from sole and scrod,
Chef picks up the phone;
Catches words like God's
From it and hurls it down.

My wife?!

Sprung from wrung bowels, the cry
Is quick disguised
By young and loyal waiters who
Toss pots and clatter pans;
Then, still in the blood-spattered apron
Of his trade, support him to a landing
Off the stairs
And seat him.
Grieve here, they say, but don't disturb
The diners who have reached liqueurs,
That profitable course.
Grieve, grieve at your ease, old man,
But do not howl.
He squats on the chair
And does not howl,
Just stares.
The while, on bloody apron gray as wash,
On face and hair of soggy ash,
On an old beat-up clothes-horse,
The young waiters wait—
Brown-skinned, black-chevelured, sinewed, muscled—
Two to a side.
And now another mounts the stair.
Cup-bearer, brandy in his hand,
His knee is bent
To climb, to make a present.
And the light shifts.
You'd say someone had varnished it.
You'd say an antiquarian Masaccio,
Stumbling upon an ancient garden statue,
Some remnant of the Greeks
Weathered to low relief,
(Silenus or a garden variety of Grief)
Had set it on its pedestal and set
His bronze-eyed cinque-cento boys round it.
Bronze-muscled and bronze-eyed,
Adept with knife and rod,
These young Guineas recognize a god,
Still.

Courage, old stone, they murmur,
(who once cold-chisel sleeked like us
To features will be reived from us,
Too)
Don't howl,
(Who are our own).
But let us go now to fetch liqueurs.
Back at their jobs,
Suave gestures,
Sorrow-spattered eyes
Abstracted to a past they can't recall,
Speak of a statue fallen
In a neglected garden,
Of abandoned sepultures.

For the Inheritors

Compassion bends us to our young
Who, in a slant-eyed glance, betray
Their old old selves.
To them we yearn, we cry—
Pushing the hair back from their solemn eyes—
No, no. Be children still.
In spite of us, your world and you are young.
Go, go. Go play.

Play? They answer
As wanting to please us, only our words
Slip by them like the cries of strange birds
Long long ago and in another world
And even there scarce heard.
Play, dear Elders? they repeat their duty.

At ease in summer chairs,
We watch the westing sun pick out
A stark oak limb
From frolic foliage,
Its massive corrugations rosy-lit.
Moved by that sudden bareness note
The strength, part true part fabulous, of oak.

In Praise

Silk without weight; liquid without wet;
Caressive yet impalpable.
Trees waving stir what sun has warmed.

We cannot use it as the birds do—
Three swifts quartering the evening sky,
The glider hawk that, quiet, quiets all.

At home though. Like silent fish
Ten fathom down on ocean's pasturage,
We move around each other separately;

Encased, enthralled and gentled by
Our kindest element, the summer air.

Guilt

Patient and small as life, our minor betrayals
Await us in the ante-room to Hell;
Mild creditors of fear and snobbery,
And lazy cruelty.

At ten, how eloquent we were to teach
That boy shame for country shoes and speech.
His blue eyes, brilliant with astonished tears,
Illuminate the years.

An old black nurse took ferry, trolley, bus
To call on his beautiful child, now all grown-up;
Grown-up too vain to doff her busyness
Before his tiredness.

And what of those lonely women who found in Death,
Not us, the punctual friend? To right and left,
The benches fill with our gentle victims; not
Insistent, not forgot.

To Apollo Musagetes

Farewell, farewell
Who was the best of me.
My mind's turned Quakerish
And silent sits
Possessed by grey vacuity.
Bunched like silly swallows on a line,
Presaging rain,
Words preen, shove, twist and twit
But will not ever burst up into the wild air again,
Nor jet-dive down that narrow, nested chimney-flue of mine.
Jet-power and precision-sight are gone,
Long gone.
Farewell.

Say I strung gauds to an almost poem;
Rhymes, rhythms, images contrived;
In fact, a compleat mechanism niftily
devised
And that pleased the critics;
Remembering thee, I could no less
Than hate that seeming
And mourn again the warm, the fleshed
And quiet breathing
That, with thy help, I'd sometimes come by.
Farewell.

Say I confessed my every grievous lack
Of body, spirit, mind and corrected all—
Shored with six virtues each sagged fault—
No effort brought, nor none will get thee back.
Thou cam'st in deed the sun
To pour me down and gild with courage, brightness, gay
persuasions.

And goest too
Like him, ghost-
ing me to farthest Antipodes,
Native
To live
There with some pale, timid, forlorn race
Of twilit savages
That's never seen thy face.
Farewell.

Who, having seen, can't keep thee
Lose heart even to weep thee.
Farewell, farewell.

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