

Poems by Kathleen McCracken

'For Us To Live A Star Must Die'

He might be right, the English physicist.
So much luminous intelligence
such exuberant good looks
seem hard to argue with
but what if he's missed the point
of time's arrow and its tendency to chaos,
all that down to the ground sound
evidence the planet's earthworks
are bent on listing, tilting
drifting westward into sandflats?

What if none of it's about
straight lines
and my father who died last year
on the cusp of summer
the brightest solstice day in history
(who we buried under lilies
his breast pocket a small nest
where our cut hair
brushes one last talisman
a pewter biplane, circa 1929)
could it be that he's not dead at all
but moving through me faster
than the measured light that's said
to travel ever outbound?

And when you kiss the crush
of strawberries from my lips
is it something more than carbon
something closer to the circulating
fleet and living heat of stars
you taste?

The Fast Healer

Because this wind holds ice inside
-omega discs, shrapnel chaff-
and I have given you to wear
my hood and sash and felted gloves
I shield your eyes with my bare hands
then turn against the isobars
and lay my body in its skins
loose along your showing bones,
here on the outer Mongolian steppe
the plumbless Northwest Passages
of our lost battles pass to you
a dream of honey, wax and oils
tungsten glow, antimony
to sup and savour as you go.

Calmly and With Animal Grace

Calmy and with animal grace
you put on the ochred cedar
mask, the robe of feathers.
There was to be a ceremony
and you knew it.
When the physicians scryed
they gave you four lean months
on the outside maybe six.
You noted their predictions
then in the acid light of winter
chose instead to shift
into Saint Francis standing shoeless
in the river's icy flow,
arms outspread and tendering
succour to the creatures,
let them settle in a sibilance
of wings and paws and furrowed horns.
Blessing them you came to be
the father of your own infant death,
nursed it up with blood and bone
and an elemental humour

until, freestanding, it outgrew you
and you left it, hoodwinked, isolate
bleached figure scouring
one bleached cell
from which you, bowing kindly out,
had long since withheld the light.

Moon with Contrail

We were talking about Wyoming
or maybe it was Wichita

when you pulled the pickup
leftways down a dirt track

scored through aspens
spilling into snowfields

braked sharp and cut the engine
under a shock of borealis.

*Look up, you said, north east
of where that trapper's moon*

*is set on riding shotgun
to the bear.*

Your hands in yellow roping gloves
were raised

a cowman's bleak, deliberate surrender
to the spinning cyan skies.

Here was eucharist
for outlaws:

I swallowed down the galaxies
came streaming from your mouth

and yes I saw the frosted contrail
(a 747 out of Denver for LA)

a rend, a rib, a stitch, a scar
at odds yet plainly wedded to the moon.

Fire Tornado

Yesterday a fire tornado cut through Sao Paulo state
upshot, the meteorologists say, of three months
drought, brush fires and fast winds.

On Aracatuba roadsides parched drivers
parked to watch that devil's tail
score alchemical insignia into the charred plateau.

I thought of you holed up in Chos Malal
deciphering how the ratio
of temperature to current
might summon that rotating column of flame
but at the same time half remembering
something about Kyoto in 1923, an earthquake
and a whiplash twister that outstripped itself and grew
the size of a large city then departed
like this one, in a flash.

In the not quite dark you're wondering
what to make of all that's been laid out, a soldier's
tin plate meal, right there in front of you:
the knucklebones, the ash, a wedding ring engraved
with initials not your own – litter of signs arranged
without a care for measurement, or so it seems.