

A Selection from Us

Vincent O'Sullivan

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First time, about Easter

There was a donkey inside a wire fence where the road
begins its first climb to the Rimutakas.

We passed it on Friday late afternoon for years,
passed it again coming back on Sundays, or thought

so in winter, when the dark was already down.
It was more grey than not, though children

reasonably argued the toss, but its muzzle
this frosty white, without question. You could not of course

hear from inside the car, but once we saw
its neck extended, its teeth displayed, without

doubt it was braying, and looked hurt: our driver
said No, it was nothing like it, yet thought of the horse

with the spiked tongue in *Guernica*, the blue-grey horse,
or paler even, imagine the glare of a search-light

picking it out in a show called 'War Arriving'.
Then one day it is gone, the donkey on the first

incline towards the Rimutaka hill. A dozen reasons.
I forgot, says another driver, a long time later,

to ever mention, did I, the one time
it snowed that far down the hill, the donkey

standing in the white paddock brought tears
to my eyes? Its head hung forward

as though too heavy for its body. As though,
finally and forever, that bit too much.

A donkey in a snowed-in paddock, under trees black
as its hooves. On the Rimutaka road. One Friday.

Three's a crowd

We've looked together – what, three, four, times? -
at Manet's barmaid. Insolent? Not quite.
Nor melancholy either, with her canny eye
for fetching decent tips from handsome cads.
'You'd have done it with like composure,' I tell
the woman I'd rather see there, pouring
thimble absinthe, than Cleopatra
talking barge-talk, gold-hulled as you like.
'I rather fancy strolling in and simply ordering.'
A touch of boredom, an obliging nod.
We both, as it happens, are wearing black.
We look at the painting I love as much as any.
'This is as good as it gets,' isn't that also
what she thinks, that marvellous unflinching gaze?
She may well be thinking of children, some impending
grief. Or joy, don't leave that out, joy's
in there too. I want to touch her hand. Taste
the glimpse of her throat. Hit the phrase to set
her smiling. 'Imagine being at that bar,' the woman
I stand with tells me. 'Such loneliness surrounds her.
All those mirrors reflecting, both the world, and not.'
And her curious judgement: 'Wish I'd known Manet.'

Love, assuming nothing

When she decided, 'All right then, *that's*
what you want,' left her jandals at the screen
door, hooked her bra on the doorknob

as she walked into the bunk-room, the rest
of whatever she'd been wearing out there still
on the verandah, he quoted a poem

that said, 'Every gift I ever imagined
comes to me, love, on these naked feet,'
so that 'smooth bastard,' she responded,

but being as good as her word, the dawn's
there in no time. Then asked, 'That French
poet, right?', and he said, 'It was.'

'Then don't,' she told him. 'Next time you
come at that caper, the show's called off.
Say it like is or I'll stone you.' He'd seldom

thrilled at anything so direct. He shoved
the *Collected Valery* beneath the mattress.
Believe it not, it lasted: as did 'every gift'.

Come again?

I've watched again a movie I saw when I was seven.
The same trees thrashed, the same moon
glinted too brightly, the wrong people kissed,
a fat nurse with a nice voice turned out to be German.

I sat in an Auckland theatre, I think the St James.
I chewed a hole in a white silk scarf in special
wartime terror. There were wry British jokes that went
over my head. I think I remembered the bit

about the postman, but forgot two doctors thumping
each other because a nurse couldn't quite decide.
The hole in the gnawed scarf is the taste frightening
my mouth. When the trees pelt because that

is what studios knew scared everyone awfully,
especially ladies starting to run back home in the dark,
and the moon glitters so everything is knife-edge,
I am there in the dark as well, I am still not sure

who is really bad when everyone seems nice.
I watch the eyes slide above surgical masks.
I remember the balloon that goes limp when someone's dead.
All this time the detective's been looking after my scarf.

Any heart would give a leap

on meeting, as I do, a woman whose calling is to discourse
in the cleverest way on Theoretical Approaches
to Biographical Texts – a Chair being the diamond in her sights,
who regards the common reader pretty much as a terrier
assesses rodents from the perspective of how necks
are best snapped:

then to hear she jumps from aircraft
at 10,000 feet, that her hobby is precisely that,
to step from a rushing door into pure speculation,
to drop for the thrill of both utter and dangerous
freedoms:

that she grips for the hands of other
jumpers, forms one of those famous descending circles
photographers die for, a human plunging Stonehenge
you might think as gravity occurs:

to hear
that, to meet her, to walk with this woman
who hates it that a sliver of discourse might drift away,
a tessera make off without standing to account,
yet has – I hear too from a colleague – a special
emergency chute she has hand-embroidered
with conventional prayer, a ‘Lord be with Me’
reminder should the ground sprawl sudden
and quicker than expected, oh unravelling text. . . .

This is a puzzle I’m ill at ease with. This is ‘a self
constructed from diverse fields of semantic force.’
There, I quote her, granting gouged respect.

Nothing truer, mind

Remember the Frenchman who said philosophy
- or one philosopher, at least – had cut
poetry's throat? The man casually beneath
the blue tree holding the white book
doesn't mind that the Frenchman said so.
He as casually liked it that he did.
He liked it, the featured poet's
throat a child might gruesomely draw
so it seemed a red ship sailing
from ear to ear, or a skipping-rope
dipped in paint and cleverly caught
at the very grinningest part of its
swing in the shouting playground.
Yes, he liked it, the reading man
with the white book in the yellow field.
Unless the Frenchman had told us
you'd fancy philosophy had so little
to offer poetry, philosophers solemnly
stropping razors for pure fun.

After that, to begin with

The wind has talked through most of what
we have said together, the wind has cleared
its throat as though doing us a favour. We
wait the streaming of leaves to pile
the corners of the veranda, before we say
'The wind we never would have believed
could last so long, has scarcely begun.'

Then proving us wrong, there is stillness
the shape of crystal slipped over the hollow
of the wind, a new fear, a different fear,
making us stand and look to trees
carved from something darker than darkness,
and we say, 'At least a few stars have made
it,' surprising us, the stars, our being

able to say, 'For certain,' an exhilaration
which after all is our simply observing distance,
and giving it a name, and saying 'There are
seven now that we count, seven, which seems
an extraordinary thing to say, 'seven stars after
so much wind,' the silence no longer laid
like a scythe against a wall for wind to dry.

Sight Unseen

A famous foreign poet came to the farm I lived on
in Pukeroro. He liked the name 'morepork' when it

narrowed the night to one complaining repetition,
he said – it was February – this was the perfect

place, surely, for fireflies, which at that time
I had never seen, not even in poetry.

A friend, a clever attractive woman, drove
him back to town. He said as they turned

to the main road near the enormous Norfolk
pine, 'Do you mind if we drive in silence?

I wish to untangle what the stars down here
are up to.' He wrote perhaps a poem which

may or may not be about his visit, the wine
we drank together, the feeling I had as he stood

at the back door and looked intently as far
as a field of corn where, if you waited with

utter patience, you could hear the army worm's
destructive rustling, which I told him

of, and he smiled, but it was like a smile
in a Bergman movie, you needed critics to explain.

The poem speaks of how light is best loved
in tiny fragments, how stars disappoint when

sky sprawls so many, how an owl
is a hooded pinprick at the world's end.

Skol

A man I talked with in a bar in Berlin
once read poetry, he said, with passion, served
with distinction in an army he loathed. Beyond
which he said little. He drank Schnapps. He advised,
as we parted, to avoid epiphanies as I would gunfire.
He phrase for ordering a Schnapps was 'to dim the lights.'

Vincent O'Sullivan who lives in Dunedin, New Zealand, is a poet, novelist, short story writer, and biographer, and is Professor Emeritus, Victoria University, Wellington. His two volume edition of *The Collected Fiction of Katherine Mansfield*, co-edited with Gerri Kimber, has just been published by Edinburgh University Press.

New volumes of stories and poetry will appear next year. The poems printed here are from that next collection, *Us.*'