

# WHISTLING IN THE DARK

by **Rose Mary Boehm**

## **All That Remains**

A murmur of atoms  
taking off in graceful denial  
of their former bonds.

## Résumé

I was born to oils on canvas.  
Mother was one of the whores of Ferrer-St. Denis,  
painter of nineteenth Century Paris nights.  
When I fell out of the womb I must have broken.  
I am a hunchback. My father,  
obsessed with women and paint,  
tried to kill me with a palette knife.  
My mother fled the studio,  
leaving behind the afterbirth and  
one shoe.

What regrets I have are not for my untimely  
and unseemly birth, but for my genius.  
When that knife nicked my baby skin,  
oil paint and turpentine entered my veins.  
There is nothing I can't paint. I smell the colours  
and feel the lines in my belly. I rise in ecstasy  
on light and shade, on this daub of red (the life-giver),  
or a brilliant white (the lace maker), or a multitude  
of greens the origins of which I've never seen.

One day my mother forgot me somewhere.  
I was picked up by the wife of a mediocre  
painter who soon made it to fame  
and wealth. Put me to work when I was five.  
Art historians everywhere sing his genius.

## Philemon and Baucis

Snow on the iced-up steps  
bits of slate broken,  
a frozen rabbit skin dangled  
from a hook near the door.  
*Come in, come in, you can't  
stay out there. This weather  
is meant for bears  
and even they are hibernating.*

Snow piled high at the back  
cutting the light, frosted glass  
with elaborate designs. A fire  
in the open grate. She buzzed  
about the small kitchen  
excitedly wiping her hands  
on her apron. A mug full  
of steaming coffee.

*Dad, come and see what  
the storm brought in.* A big  
old man bent under the arch  
when he entered the kitchen  
from the other room.  
He chewed and smiled  
and sharpened his axe.

## All Hallows' Eve

This moon is rough around  
the edges.  
It's a humble tumble fumble moon.

*Santa Muerte.*  
Dance of those who know.  
Who've been.  
*Samhain.*

Beat the rhythm with the bones. Bring  
back the cattle.  
Lawter.  
Day of slaughter.

*Santa Muerte*, the night walker stalker  
out  
about.

*Sindhe* doors.  
Light the good fires.  
Set a table for dead kin.  
Prepare the barn.

Black clouds obscure the gallows  
hallows  
holy be your offering.

Smoke soak my skin,  
ablute, restitute, retribute.

## **The Night He Stopped Being a Boy**

He stands for a while,  
hands in his pockets,  
touching the secrete stone  
from the midnight pond  
under the rain trees.

His cap pushed to the back  
of his head, stubborn stubble  
brushes up from his scalp.  
His trousers reach almost  
to his knees, his shoes  
sturdy, his imagination  
limitless, his fear palpable.

Testing himself against trees,  
ferns, undergrowth, night birds,  
rustlings, and all things that wait  
behind the dense shrubs  
to taste his flesh.

He is not at all sure  
he'll see his mother ever  
again, but he knows that  
something is watching.

## Waterways

The green girl waited at the pier.  
Hovered around the black pylons,  
wet and rotting, lashed by the waves,  
painted in abstracts  
by sea moss.

Fernando pushed out his boat.  
Young, brown, muscular and carefree.  
The birds screeched in anticipation  
of his return. Sea lions pretended  
not to notice. Nets neatly rolled,  
ready for an early winter catch.  
Oil lamp in the bow.

She slid into the *lancha*. Undulated,  
coiled beneath the tackle. Weeks later  
they found him washed up on the beach  
near turtle rock, a smile on his blue lips.

## **Dover to Canterbury**

We'll soon pass the spot where I  
see her every time. Not once has she missed.  
Started to call her Emma.

The rain whips against  
smeared windows. I strain  
to peer into the night.

Perhaps she had bathed in  
the arrogance of wealth,  
the handsomeness of knowing  
her place. Couldn't have been  
more than about twenty-five.

One day I ask in the pub.  
Drive to the estate.  
The manor and grounds hidden  
behind a gnarled, leafless overgrowth.  
Scale the crumbling wall.

An anemic light from a dying  
autumn moon haloes a woman. I follow.  
Her long hair barely catches the weak light.

Her white gown billowing in the breeze  
she hovers near the train lines.  
Sparks spew into thick black.

A locomotive riots closer and bucks  
when brakes screech it to a sudden  
halt. In glowing white a woman  
lies under the unforgiving wheels.

I tried to rescue her one hundred years  
too late. But she knew I was watching.

## **Epilogue Found in the Diaries of the Widow Rochester**

(Jane Eyre by Charlotte Brontë)

Yes, reader, I married him.

A short while after our son was born  
his obsessions began, and I recognized  
his first wife's despair. Edward, even though  
no longer completely blind, did not ever fully regain  
his sight and distrusted the world and me.

My marriage became darker and darker  
until I reverted to calling him 'Mr. Rochester'.  
At moments it was as though a beam of sunlight  
filtered through the curtains of foreboding  
and I would take heart, only to be plunged  
once more into the deepest gloom. One starless  
night Mr Rochester fell off his horse and broke  
his neck. Since then guilt has been my companion  
and melancholy covers me like a heavy blanket.

Still, I can hear my children playing under the trees.  
Occasional laughter drifts my way. We are blessed.

## **Another Mermaid Story**

A small, brown village  
on the Cornish coast.  
Ruby married Fred.  
She'd had enough of filing  
in the 'Museum for Fishing and Smuggling'.  
Fred liked Ruby because she was round  
and sleek as a seal.  
A slight scent of ocean  
hovered over her skin.

Ravenous triplets sucked her dry.  
In the supermarket she pushed  
a tank with three activated  
missiles from aisle to aisle.

Ruby soon neglected them.  
Preferred to watch  
the silvery catches  
in the harbour.

Fred hired a nanny. Took to her.  
Ruby took to the fishermen.  
Both grew into the comfortable  
co-existence of mutual dislike.

Ruby disappeared.  
Fred drank her health.  
In the bar that night a fisherman  
mentioned that he'd seen a selky  
swim out into the Celtic Sea.

## **Sister Emilia**

She'd herself danced with the devil.  
So she said.  
Over and over again.  
When she pulpiterated about Lucifer  
a wistful smile seemed to weave itself into her  
face, even gentled that huge hooked nose.  
Made the rimless glasses sparkle.

On Sundays she wore a frozen smile.  
The wolf ingratiating himself to that little  
lonely girl in the woods, his head covered  
by a starched, white coif.  
Leaving room for the ears.  
Under his chin the big white bow.

Sin, sinner, sinnest.  
A basket full of gluttony.  
Lipsticks made from damnation.  
Lust, iniquity, transgression, sloth.  
Wrath.

Snow White and seven castrated dwarfs.  
Virgins are eaten by dragons.  
King Kong the gentle, imprisoned and  
exhibited, prodded and cut.  
Edification.

Hallelujah.  
In the name of the Lord.  
When Sister Emilia stopped preaching,  
her face bathed in holy sweat and zealotry,  
I imagined how she once took money before the service.

## **Sunday School**

He said it would be our secret.  
When he touched me there  
it hurt and made me feel  
like when Josh and I played doctors  
behind the tool shed.  
And he said it was God's will;  
because that's what girls are made for  
and who best but him to teach  
me how to pray in the right position.  
When he pulled down my knickers  
he said he just wanted to see  
whether the devil  
had already made himself at home.

## **The Signs Were Here All Along**

Weak light, black earth frozen  
hard. Pale days during which  
the birds lost their voices, not daring  
to give away their positions, lest  
they too would suffer the blight.  
Lines undefined, dull mornings  
eating their advance through  
the dim undergrowth, aimless  
living bows at breaking point.  
My boots find no purchase,  
the ground iced suddenly,  
my ankles fold more than once.  
I can't break the fall, my body  
slides forward, I don't trust my eyes,  
but my hands bless the impossible; hidden  
under the briars unfolds an act of faith  
and sheer perseverance: the first  
snowdrops pushing out of the frozen  
womb, insisting it's their time.

## **Fishing**

We pretended to fish  
with first morning light,  
the waking leaves  
and early birds, the stillness  
of Dutch waters.  
Jumping fish  
startled us.

Your call conjured up  
damaged enchantments.

I have this space  
deep inside. Something  
buried alive,  
still writhing  
when dawn breaks  
an unquiet night.

Though you got old,  
you knew  
that we'd been lovers.  
The strain in your voice  
told me you remembered.

## **clandestine**

meet me at the old  
victoria station hotel  
make it eleven.

hookers, lovers, trains  
pass sooty windows

don't bring luggage  
just remember  
how I loved you  
last winter in Antwerp.

your wet skin reflects  
the almost light  
under these high ceilings,  
bent venetian blinds hide  
curtains torn by time,  
the station clock  
has no mercy.