

Katherine Shirley – Three Poems



© Christopher Wood: Ulysses and the Sirens
(aka Mermaids)

Sirens

I heard it today, the sirens' call
Could feel their eyes upon me, taste
Their mockery, as the girl approached
She wanted to emulate me, my flow
Each swish – she needed to learn
To swim. Only two lengths
Of an indoor pool, in order
To get her wings, to launch
Her long legs into the sky
While crewing a cabin.
Would I please tell her my secret?
Teach her to be at ease in the water
Stroking her way to a salary.
Her demonstrable skills thus deemed
Sufficient to leave her the protector
Of passengers, shipwrecked and drowning
In the deep, wide oceans.
The sirens whispered
Their hearts hungry, their call a caress:
Lead her and leave her to us
We shall pluck silver birds from the sky
And feast on flesh, not fish
Stretch out your arms
And help her find our fins.
Ill-equipped to explain my hesitation
I granted the girl's wish
To appease my own.

Pirates

A leotard for modesty
And sequins for scales
Their grateful offering
If I will only play-act
In two dimensions
My long locks flowing
To my tapered waist
A living symbol
Of Victorian prudery
To open Act One
With a splash

Tamesis Dreams

Telling tall tales
Of scaly monsters, hidden
Lurking in the depths
Of a suburban bathroom
Night terrors, drowning
Surrounded by dirty water
Long hair fanning out
In powdery clouds
As manicured hands grasped
My childish limbs and pulled
Down, hard, separating my
Self from all land-locked leanings
Until eyes dulled with
River mud, gazed empty
At the echoing stars

Below, Katherine Shirley explains the stories behind her poems...

Sirens

The seed of story behind this poem is taken from a real life encounter I had with a young would-be stewardess at my local swimming pool. I really enjoy playing with meaning and the sound of words, so the alliteration and light double entendre of 'stroking her way to a salary' is definitely intended, as are the sibilant syllables of the Sirens voices in my head with their swishes and

whispers. My Sirens are predators, malicious and pitiless. They use the baser human desires, the 'deadly' sins: wrath, sloth, greed, gluttony, envy, lust, pride to trap their prey, giving the victim their heart's desire before exacting their own price, and what seems to be an altruistic decision to help is twisted into a trap with a deadly end.

Pirates

I was involved with an amateur production of 'The Pirates of Penzance' some years ago during which the Director decided to spice things up by adding a momentary topless mermaid to open the show. My notion of mermaids is informed by Homer, Dante's Furies; Virgil's Erinyes and my grandmother's terrifying illustrated book of Greek Myths. They are not creatures to be taken lightly; nor dismissed with a wave and a smile. The idea of creating a mermaid sanitised in sequins really stuck in my craw. My mermaids are murderous monsters; their mention on a map a dire warning of particular danger to sailors – something to avoid, to be wary of, likely to bring about shipwreck and death, not sell tepid operetta and ice-creams. To my frustration, the Director would only see his two-dimensional mermaid as a period page three girl to get the old men in the audience in the mood to sit through the rest of the show. This poem is my verbal revenge on behalf of that mermaid, asked to suppress half of her very nature in favour of an exploitative display intended only to titillate with a show of humanoid skin.

Tamesis Dreams

This poem takes me right back to childhood and relates the events of a recurring nightmare I had when I was seven. The tall tales that played out in my head always included an element of loss of control. The contrast of my familiar 'suburban bathroom' with the wild and sinister London river, two very different settings for water, allow for other comparisons: clean and dirty; night terrors and daydreams; the simplicity of childhood versus the calculated mischief of adulthood with its manicured talons, hiding danger underneath the artistry and mock-sophistication of paint. The implied rape of innocence with the juxtaposition of childish limbs, violence and separation from the familiar world is a nod to the effects of a mental encounter with the sort of monsters that lurk in the shadows to prey upon children. The final lines play testament to the changed perspective of adulthood, when the imagination transforms the mystical to mud and the magic of the night sky into lonely balls of rock, far, far away.