

**An essay on Brendan Kennelly by Patricia McCarthy  
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**Musicwords**

Brendan Kennelly: *Reservoir Voices*, Bloodaxe 2009 (£8.95 pback)

I have in front of me a pile of at least fifteen collections of poetry, including many early pamphlets and books with spines by little presses such as Tara Telephone Publications, New Square Publications, The Dolmen Press, Allen Figgis & Co Ltd., Profile Press, Beaver Row Press, Gallery Press (then small) by Brendan Kennelly, much loved, best-selling Irish poet who has in fact written well over thirty books of verse. Other volumes by this master impersonator, epic composer, word-singer, wisdom-giver, life-enhancer, history-maker, myth-monger are on further bookshelves, often personally inscribed beautifully to me: 'To Patricia, keep on singing', 'To Patricia whose own voice I love and admire', 'To Patricia, I hope you write lots of great ones out in Bangladesh' where I lived at the time, proving him, along with copious letters of comments on my poems in his handwriting which remains the same to this day many decades later, to be a fine mentor – not only to me but to many.

For years now, however, Bloodaxe have been promoting this popular, human, 'bold' in the Irish sense of the word, and visionary poet whose has spoken out in myriad voices, possessed with the gift of tongues. Strange that his tongue has been more or less exclusively English, albeit involving the use of many different Englishes from all over the world, considering that he was brought up in the Gaeltacht in County Kerry and spoke only Irish up until his early manhood. A unique facility Kennelly has always had is to create poems which are accessible to uneducated, non-literary readers, yet which also speak to those well-versed in poetry at the deepest metaphorical levels.

In his Preface to his hefty tome of 496 pages, *Familiar Strangers, New & Selected Poems 1960-2004*, Bloodaxe 2004, (£12 paperback), Kennelly speaks articulately about his Englishes that 'demand voices. Say me', and about how for a long time he has envisaged poetry as 'a house of voices'. 'Objects need voices as people, ideas and feelings need them'. He has certainly given voice not only to the deepest feelings in his own complex self, but also to unspeakable, repulsive and horrific beings such as his well-researched Cromwell who was despicable to the Irish, and to Judas who speaks throughout a whole book of almost 400 pages. 'Cromwell and Judas educated me' he says and affirms that these people on the margins of a moral society 'help us to understand our own mysterious humanity, or lack of it'.

This latest collection, *Reservoir Voices*, like his other collections spoken in different voices, particularly of concrete or abstract things, is reminiscent – in tone and delivery of the slightly mysterious persona – of Anglo-Saxon riddles. It shows him continuing his gift of tongues as he gets across the voices and characters of various types of people such as the 'Insider' or 'Outsider'; of things such as parts of the body like thighs, eyes, bellybutton, throat, fingers; of the object, or abstract vice or virtue he personifies and allegorises such as 'Shame', 'Pretence', 'Vanity'. In direct, plain, unadorned speech that veers between an entertaining lightness of touch in the slighter, punchy poems that are unfailing in their wit and metaphysical conceits, sometimes almost like aphorisms, and the more frequent serious poems with suggestive undertones and subtexts, we see Kennelly's continuing concerns for the human race by inviting us, the readers, to look at ourselves differently. As always, he does not shy

away from the political, the religious or the sexual. He once told me that he considered the actual process of writing a poem very close to the sexual act, and indeed, Rainer Maria Rilke, whom I discussed with Kennelly years ago, expressed the same view in the first letter of his 'Letters to a Young Poet'. Rilke also seems to be behind Kennelly in his Ninth Duino Elegy, urging him to spell out the voices of concrete and abstract things: 'oh for such saying as never the things themselves/hoped so intensely to be' (translation by Leishman and Spender). Such saying indeed, as achieved by Kennelly.

Kennelly links to Rilke in perhaps another way: by producing poems like the Dinggedicht or 'thing/object poems' created by Rilke in the *Neue Gedichte*. The empathy with the subject of the poem is so great that the writer, the 'I', disappears into the poem, resulting in lyrics that are 'things' like pieces of sculpture. Indeed, the spirited poems in *Reservoir Voices* are like this. Each one is all of a piece, beautifully honed, illustrating the poet's dramatic skills, and in need of being quoted whole to do it justice with its clever wordplay, bits of stories, gossip even, inversion of clichés, consummate rhymes, humour, lived-in wisdom, celebration, and involvement always of the 'you' who is the reader. By this addressing of the reader and by making the reader active in each poem, Kennelly offers us new, kind of upside-down perspectives on ourselves as humans, as he encourages us to examine ourselves. Each voice has the authentic ring of the personal, but the personal 'I' of the poet is abstracted from it and the voice in each dramatic monologue is timeless and universal. Often, lines are thought-provoking in their seeming simplicity, such as the final line of the short poem 'Paper': 'Only time is wasted more than me'. Kennelly has, it seems, always listened out for his voices throughout his poetic life; they have come to him like gifts – varied and authentic – and he has surrendered to them. In the Note to this latest collection, *Reservoir Voices*, written at the edge of a reservoir near Boston College where the poet spent a semester, Kennelly describes how the voices came to him 'with suggestions, images, memories, delights, horrors, rhythms, insights and calm, irrefutable insistence that it was they who were speaking, not me'. It was 'the emptiness of intense loneliness', it seems, that drove him to give these voices their space to articulate themselves in 'musicwords'.

As Kennelly himself notes in his Preface to *Familiar Strangers, New & Selected Poems 1960-2004* (Bloodaxe), he preferred to group his poems thematically rather than chronologically. 'No single section of *Familiar Strangers* is rigidly structured because poems from different sections, written in different decades, overlap and echo each other. It's as if one's mind and imagination have a number of deep-rooted, obstinate obsessions that still assert their presence, no matter how frequently expressed.' This applies probably to not as many poets as it should. Kennelly's voice has remained totally his own for over five decades now, never seduced by affectation, fads or fashion, and the corpus of his work, when reconsidered carefully, is more experimental and ground-breaking in its rootedness than it might on the surface seem.

Hence the voices in *Reservoir Voices*, and those in his earliest collections like *Bread, The Voices, Salvation, the Stranger*, are not merely bookends for the body of his work (he is now in his early seventies). They are entities in themselves, pointers, finders, re-considerings, illuminations; they stand on their own yet are part of the mosaic made by his poems, all of which have a heartbeat, an affirmation, and express, as Kennelly says is his aim, 'the freshness that is forever being lost in familiarity, the vitality that is constantly being swamped by boredom.' It is a tribute to him that he has achieved what he set out to do (see his Note to *Salvation, the Stranger*, 1972): 'to discover and demonstrate the thrust and surge of a life in a language which wipes the

sleep from the eyes of cliché, rejuvenates the jaded truth in platitude, liberates the rhythms within, and does justice to what I am permitted to perceive in the world about me.' 'Through repetition', he continues, 'it is possible to dig more deeply into oneself, to face oneself, and to relate, in a faithful coherent way, with the secret life of things and people in the world outside'

Along with Rilke, another forefather of the poet is Samuel Beckett, also at Trinity College, Dublin. In the latter's recently published first volume of letters, (*The Letters of Samuel Beckett 1929-1940*, Cambridge University Press 2009), Beckett, despite his many protests to the contrary, is buoyed up by a preoccupation he shares with Kennelly: his 'obsession with words entire alive', words that are 'the breath tokens of life'. Kennelly has an altogether more positive philosophical approach to life than the existentialist Beckett from the same university and country, yet his poems do breathe as those very 'breath tokens of life' both in this sequence and in the whole corpus of his work. In Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, two lines exchanged between Estragon and Vladimir come to mind:

Estragon: All the dead voices

Vladimir: They make a noise like wings.

Kennelly's voices are never 'dead', but they do make a noise like wings. I have never forgotten, for example, his big poem, 'My Dark Fathers', 'Love Cry', 'The Hurt', the visionary poems in *The Man Made of Rain* (Bloodaxe, 1998) written just after a massive heart bypass operation, and so the list continues.

Open before me is a lovely hard-back copy of the collection, *Love Cry*, published in 1972, containing 48 beautifully composed, affirmative sonnets, full of love poems whether for a girl/woman, for the tough-living farming characters and their stock that he was brought up in County Kerry, for the sea, for Brendan of Ardfert, his namesake, for mythological, biblical and historical figures. Kennelly told me at that time that the sonnet form got so deeply embedded inside his head that for around three years he could write nothing but sonnets.

Like the voice of Daring in the poem of that title's last line from *Reservoir Voices*, Kennelly, for over half a century, has dared love the 'helplessly human' which surely applies to us all, and to himself. He is a poet through and through as he breathes out and in, even as he sends chocolates from 'Brendan of Dublin' which I help myself to, the inscription on the box in his same, distinctive, ageless handwriting as in his inscriptions and letters received all those years ago.

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