





BANSHEE

poems by D. A. Clarke

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dedicated to my mother, my friends, our future  
and to the people of El Salvador in their  
valiant resistance to American-funded  
fascism.

BANSHEE  
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D. A. Clarke

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## MY MOTHER'S EDUCATION

my mother gave me words,  
music, and table manners:  
she brought me up in love.  
I wish she had taught me streetfighting.

for I did not come into a world  
of fireplaces and tablecloths;  
I came where one out of three  
one out of three of me is raped  
where the men I am supposed to  
smile and pass the butter to  
are carving up my sisters  
instead of the holiday turkey  
and their magazines portion me out  
in sections like the dead cows  
my mother taught me love  
she might better have taught me rage

she would have taken up weapons  
to keep her child from harm  
she gave me love but truth is  
I was born to a war and I wish  
I wish I came better armed

ad lib

when am I out of costume --  
listening for your applause  
as for a rising of white birds,  
a falling of pale sand?

when they say to you Do not be afraid  
for there are people all around  
then be afraid

when they say to you Don't worry  
there are lots of people watching  
then worry

when they say to you Don't be concerned  
we all want to protect you  
then be concerned

when they say to you It's all right  
that couldn't happen to you  
then it is not all right

it has never been all right  
when we already knew the script  
and our improvisos were hissed  
when we thought we were out of costume

for Barbara Schwartz (and all the others)

this is not happening

this is not happening

if you repeat it often enough

this is not happening

you will be home reading a book

you will be waking shaken from a bad dream

if only you repeat it often enough

this is not happening

then the pain will not arrive

and the defeat will not burn you with tears

and the ugliness of it will shimmer away and be

the steam from the kettle as you sit reading

if only you can repeat it often enough

this is not happening

the chasm will close, you will be walking home

thirty minutes earlier as you might have

and the future as it always is will displace

the unspeakable future on the way

and you will go home, lock the door

make tea, read a book

if only you could repeat it often enough

this is not happening

this is not happening

not this

## 1990 election blues

When we give birth to children without eyes  
or without brains, with a limb too many  
bones in the wrong places  
or skin that won't stay on,  
by then abortion will be illegal (even with wealth),  
single women prohibited from the workplace  
and married ones forbidden contraception;  
who knows, maybe they'll take the vote away --  
it was only a gesture at best anyway.  
And they will blame us for the children who cannot see  
the lights of the cooling towers, who will never hear  
a cropduster pass nor taste the bitter breath  
of their cities, they will blame us  
saying we cursed them with this, or that  
our bodies' filth spawns useless filth.

But wasn't that it all along? unable to bear  
(or to bear themselves) they cut out our wombs  
in bitter envy, stole our ovaries; unable to birth  
they made birthing miserable, took our children away  
from our steady hearts, drugged us senseless,  
cut our babies out of us, babies already sedated,  
crying feebly at the violent male hand; unable to conceive  
(or to conceive of) life, they teach their sons to kill us  
and each other, rape our daughters, work toward  
the death of every green and growing thing...  
meanwhile hailing, miracle! the recombinant gene,  
manipulated, floating in sterile solution, somewhat obscene



When we give birth to children without eyes  
because we have been poisoned and we have no choice,  
then will they have achieved their long desire?  
When women are prohibited from bearing  
as we produce only deformity, then life shall be  
the province of white men in white coats working miracles:  
no man shall owe a woman his existence.  
White men in white coats among tall glass cabinets  
shall birth endless, useful male children, uniformly pink,  
under controlled conditions, out of a synthetic womb --  
out of a synthetic tomb, and their province is death.

What then, when women may not bear  
by law, and no man owes us his existence?  
The last thing gone that kept us from the rifle,  
we follow whales and wolves and egrets, gone  
to the tail of the sad procession shuffling on  
into the arms of the grieving night;  
unable to believe it, dazed, in vast numbers,  
into the oven, the abattoir, the fenced camp,  
angry at last when we are too far gone to fight.

celibacy

This is when you need a lover, when  
you've just read FEMALE SEXUAL SLAVERY and  
all of your good friends are just good friends  
and no one will wake up and hold your hand --

when there's no one to call at one a m and cry  
over the phone to, your good friends need their sleep;  
when you see no future, when you sit and wait to die  
they do not come over, cuddle and kiss and keep  
you company until the demons go away:  
this is when you need a lover, and a cat won't do,  
when you cry for battered women, and you say  
names of the Goddess, and the darkness hushes you

about old maids

a man wrote the story and in the story  
a man said  
to another man  
that goddamn 29yearold  
virgin

he spat it out  
it was a curse  
he'd called her other things but he  
stopped there, could think of nothing  
worse

every slave must wear a collar  
every Jew a yellow star  
every cow an owner's brand  
a K a circle M a bar  
and every woman must have been  
once in her life fucked by a man

do not smile  
(for l. hibma)

she smiles when she's angry:  
she giggles and looks down, raising her voice  
in pitch only, until she sounds  
like a tired child, how much  
rage is piled up behind that smile, oh how much  
rage, and how many tears?

I don't know... she says, when she knows  
very well that she's angry, I don't know...  
and she laughs, and I clench my fists  
till they hurt, to see a woman smile  
swallowing her anger, to see this  
giggling for men's benefit, it is the brand  
of the lifelong don't hit me slave  
who dares not  
not smile

who dares not rage  
now in these days of terror who dares not  
fight, loses hourly, the gradual  
diminution  
of self

sister someday forbear  
to smile, put away the veil  
heal the broken feet and uncorset  
the soul, this rage  
is centuries old  
long in fruition, clean as the north  
wind and a harbinger  
of storm, oh sister  
in slave's mask, let it fall  
for once: for all

patience on a monument smiling at grief  
(a Victorian cliché)

Patience on the monument smiles  
with the sweet half smile of the martyrs  
at Grief her longtime lover  
(I once had a lover  
lived for her and never  
owned to that name never)  
Grief lives in our houses  
acknowledgement is due her

it is time to get down off the monument  
take that sick smile off our faces  
and go and shake hands with Grief  
she has been with us forever  
while we were inanely smiling  
wishing she would go away  
she is our longtime lover  
Patience won't send her away

we have smiled at our lovers when our stomachs felt knife-wounded  
we have smiled nervously at the men just before they raped us  
we have smiled our souls away, forgotten how to shout  
we have smiled too much, too often, and with too little reason

it is time to get down off the monument  
it is time to be done with Patience;  
Patience has no pride, but we  
(though her lips are salt and bitter  
and we kiss her in desperate anger)  
we will have no more of Patience,  
we will kiss goodbye to Grief

## community foods

there were new organic tomatoes,  
and the ?gay man next to me said How remarkable,  
they must be hot-house, the Mexican ones  
are barely here and they're full of all kinds  
of junk; and our two pale hands sorted through  
pale orange tomatoes, discriminating,  
and I said, What they can't spray here  
they sell to South America, and hey la  
back it comes in the spring, so neat,  
I said, so sensible, so tidy

Are you into that, he said, as if it were volleyball  
or Esalen, you seem to know a bit, I mean  
are you part of a campaign or  
something?

I just know too much, I said, it's not  
good for you, it affects  
your sleeping habits

Does it really, he began, but I headed  
for the peaches and plums, almost shaking  
with too much knowledge, too little sleep  
and almost no hope at all;  
even shopping for crisp new vegetables  
seems a mere ritual, eating  
and breathing only gestures  
or a shaky whistle in the pitch dark; why  
was he not frightened, I wonder

privilege

a poem for men who don't understand what we mean when we say they have it

privilege is simple:

going for a pleasant stroll after dark,  
not checking the back of your car as you get in, sleeping soundly,  
speaking without interruption, and not remembering  
dreams of rape, that follow you all day, that woke you crying, and  
privilege

is not seeing your stripped, humiliated body  
plastered in celebration across every magazine rack, privilege  
is going to the movies and not seeing yourself  
terrorized, defamed, battered, butchered  
seeing something else

privilege is

riding your bicycle across town without being screamed at or  
run off the road, not needing an abortion, taking off your shirt  
on a hot day, in a crowd, not wishing you could type better  
just in case, not shaving your legs, having a decent job and  
expecting to keep it, not feeling the boss's hand up your crotch,  
dozing off on late-night busses, privilege  
is being the hero in the TV show not the dumb broad,  
living where your genitals are totemized not denied,  
knowing your doctor won't rape you

privilege is being

smiled at all day by nice helpful women, it is  
the way you pass judgment on their appearance with magisterial authority,  
the way you face a judge of your own sex in court and  
are overrepresented in Congress and are not strip searched for a traffic ticket  
or used as a dart board by your friendly mechanic, privilege  
is seeing your bearded face reflected through the history texts  
not only of your high school days but all your life, not being  
relegated to a paragraph  
every other chapter, the way you occupy  
entire volumes of poetry and more than your share of the couch unchallenged,  
it is your mouthing smug, atrocious insults at women  
who blink and change the subject -- politely -- privilege  
is how seldom the rapist's name appears in the papers  
and the way you smirk over your PLAYBOY

it's simple really, privilege  
means someone else's pain, your wealth  
is my terror, your uniform  
is a woman raped to death here or in Cambodia or wherever  
wherever your obscene privilege  
writes your name in my blood, it's that simple,  
you've always had it, that's why it doesn't  
seem to make you sick at stomach,  
you have it, we pay for it, now  
do you understand

at work

he is telling a funny story:  
his wife wants new drapes.  
this is terribly funny.  
You know how women are, he says  
indulgently, You know how women are

he is not aware he is looking roughly  
more or less sort of at  
or through  
me.

this is one of the facts of nonentity, this  
being looked through; there are others.  
I would tell you, but there is  
no time

You know how women are  
yes I do know sir I know very well  
you never will

I know how women are beaten  
and beaten down, I know how women  
are crying, I know how  
women are singing, how women are  
working, how women are speaking  
to each other  
when no man listens

how women are sedated with addictive drugs  
by respectable men, less respectable men  
resorting to fists

I know how women are  
dispossessed of our humanity  
how women are  
displayed like meat or candy  
in every storefront and magazine



I know  
how women are  
slandered by your histories  
lied about by nice men like you  
despised by your pretty religion of Daddies and Sons

how women are looked roughly more or less  
through how women are invisible  
nameless silent

how women are  
scarred with the scars of burning  
how women are  
the great-  
great-great-great-granddaughters  
of women burnt alive by nice men like you

how women are unpublished, bodies and minds edited,  
misrepresented, censored, cut out,  
cut up

how women are raped and in what  
numbers

I would tell you, I would tell you, but  
there is no time, no  
time

yes sir I know how women are  
I know very well, I  
know how women are strong how beautiful strong  
women are  
how women are  
angry  
how  
angry women  
are  
how angry  
how angry  
women are

to l. c.

my favourite tough woman  
highway indian  
her muscles move under tawny skin  
like molten steel,  
her hands are scarred; she's seen too much  
been too much, lost friends  
lost touch:  
now she pretends  
not to feel

her eyes are cool, clean  
washed gray and clear  
by storms, disillusionment, and fear;  
like the hawk's, the cougar's eye  
not unused to pain,  
cold as this december sky  
old with doubt -- and then again  
new, new, serene  
gentle as rain

my favourite tough woman:  
like thin glass she is filled  
with fire, fey, sudden as those first  
violets at the forest's huge feet;  
as fragile, feral, sweet,  
as proud

                  she hates to lie  
would rather see the worst  
and she will

tough flowers, they grow among stones  
on cement, between bones:  
but pluck them, keep them  
and they die

the screaming

Mentally I am infibulated; I open up my soul  
every night in secret, making speeches to the ceiling  
in the dark. And in the day I go about sewn up and raging;  
the jokes, the callous hatred, all male needling  
strikes me dumb, webs my lips, seals me up against invasion.  
I am silent, I burn, my hands shake, I hide my feelings --  
this is my life: how shall I refuse it?

On TV a woman gives birth in pain.  
What's she screaming about? says the scientist  
the man I work for, what the hell is all the  
screaming about? and he grimaces at the screen.  
The newsman reports two rapes three blocks apart  
by an average man  
with a white Trans Am  
no rings and a centre part:  
I want him to die.  
The men make jokes about the time between;  
they say the one's an alibi  
for the other, or he's some kind of Superman.

I do believe they think he's Superman.  
I know they think it's funny though I'm not sure why they can.  
I sit in my chair, I knot up inside, if I start to shout  
about pain, horror, fear, raped women, agony,  
defeat they laugh away, I know I know what comes to me:  
peevish, whiny, weary,  
what's all the screaming about?

The screaming  
is about having needles in your mouth.

The screaming  
is about real rage, love, despair, real feeling.

It is about having a knife in my hand  
and too much sense to use it.

## song for Kali

mother i am taking my knife  
I am going hunting

I have many sisters  
I have much to avenge; I have strong  
family feelings, strong family  
strong feelings; I sit  
on the step, sharpening my knife

I am going after the doctors  
who prescribed DES and the doctors  
who designed Dalkon Shields and the doctors  
who gave sedatives instead of exams and the doctors  
who experimented on the poor women and the doctors  
who were too stupid to wash their hands  
who recommended electroshock  
who gave backroom abortions  
and frontroom Valium  
who endorsed tampons  
and jailed the midwife

I am sharpening my knife

I am going after the Boston Strangler  
the Hillside Strangler the Westside Rapist  
Stinky the Rapist Jack the Ripper and Larry Flynt --  
we shall be short of heroes

when the nice man is pulling the little girl into his car  
I will be behind his seat; when the husband  
is systematically battering his wife  
I will step out of the refrigerator  
surprise I am a knife

where the drill sergeant teaches his men  
about rifles and guns, where he calls them cunt  
and beats them into killers I will be  
under his bunk, surprise. where the soldiers fuck  
the woman to death in the mud, I will be  
waiting in the truck, surprise; what do I care  
who taught them?

I am hunting, I am everywhere; and Kali  
knows me

where the judge rules the woman's life  
worth less than the embryo's I will be  
behind his office door, surprise, I am  
a knife. where the boss cans the women  
because his workplace is poisoning them  
where the company clinic smiles and lies  
where the board of directors looks aside  
from the Love Canals, from the Oregon lakes  
spiked with 2,4,5-T, I will be, they will meet me  
in the dark  
a knife  
surprise

mother I am going hunting  
I am taking my knife no gun  
don't wait up they will kill me  
long before I am done  
I will bring you no trophy  
but Kali  
knows me

no good reason

I crawled up the Mountain in my old bus  
thinking of you not the Empire;  
I moved into a grand hotel  
that I share with some rats and spiders;  
some nights the heater wakes me up,  
I think it's the Gestapo coming;  
I wander round twitchy as my cat,  
ears back, looking for something  
to jump -- so I can kill it

tonight we did no work; here I am  
in the brain-room of the building,  
a tough young ghost in blue jeans  
guarding a mausoleum;  
the toys of men remind me of death --  
I wrote because I missed you,  
there was no good reason

I dreamt last night I kissed you  
and we quarrelled for no good reason;  
I dreamt the police were after me  
and I crashed my bike on the highway  
and no one came to look for me:  
am I afraid for no good reason

I will burn a candle to Aphrodite.  
I love you for no good reason.

aloe vera

embitterment  
is medicinal as aloes, true aloes:  
little shocks, like  
    cold water in the morning  
    a close call on the road  
    or a dream of death;

little insults and minor  
condescensions,  
small  
stones  
thrown by malicious habit

little embitterments  
as medicinal as aloes, true aloes --  
the taste of reality

this is your life  
do you want it  
this is your life  
can you stand it  
this is your life  
your life the next sixty-odd years

three pavaues for a dead witch

this is the woman they like to remember, they liked to paint  
the pretty lady with the white hands  
who ate arsenic to keep them white,  
the woman with the hourglass waist  
and the prolapsed uterus -- she wore corsets --  
the caged invalid blinking in the light,  
the woman tottering on smashed and rotting feet  
delicately they say, and I say mutilated,  
made over, warped, pared, carved to her owner's taste;  
the demure bride, mute, drugged, infibulated,  
the silent widow cast upon the pyre:  
this they enjoy remembering, this they say  
is beauty, this, to this  
you may aspire

no I remember the woman screaming blackening in the fire

not their pallid mirror of my death:  
I remember a different woman, women  
breathing together and shaking with the breath  
bringing another daughter into the world;  
the woman up to her elbows in potter's clay  
the woman with dirty fingernails gathering herbs  
my mother her mother up to her elbows in life  
birthing and building and bartering, sharp as the knife  
she knew how to use, each in her place  
striding good earth to good purpose, her I admire;  
the big-voiced woman, the common scold  
the one with the broad brown arms that could hold  
children, unruly horses, and borders, that could hold  
a sword, when she had to

who could heal, who could grow  
green life out of winter earth, herd goats, light hearths  
and hearts, the witch the farmer the singer of songs  
baxter webster tapster her I admire;  
walking the world on her two good feet she goes  
old as the hills, young as the leaf, and strong  
strong with the strength that is real grace:  
her I admire



I remember my mother screaming dying in the fire

do you know how much rage is in me?  
there is enough rage in me to break bones  
smash windows overturn cars set bombs  
ticking at the base of corporate towers:  
rage that demands a price, will collect a price  
for crippled feet and crippled minds and hateful lies  
and for my sister dying in the fire:

rage enough to blister paint, rust steel,  
melt asphalt in the streets, rage enough  
to tear the flesh away that is the face that masks the liar  
who would cut the life out of me and call the scar  
love -- the paternal smile, to tear away the smile  
in shreds, to melt, to rust, to peel, to claw away  
the smile. they say I go too far; I say  
you do not know how far is far

Note: the -ster ending was originally a feminine one; 'seamstress' is a coinage which dates from after the exclusion of women from the trades in England. Before this time there were many trades traditionally practised by independent women of middle class: baking, brewing, weaving, spinning, innkeeping, and tailoring are among them. These women in their time were called bakesters, brewsters, websters, spinsters, tapsters, seamsters. etc., until these suffixes were masculinized by the gradual takeover of all professions by men. Hence my commemoration of the 'baxter, webster, tapster' women from whom many of the common English family names descend (women in those days did not, in general, lose their surnames -- usually their professional names -- if they married).

winter, mt. hamilton, 81

I had forgotten  
the desperate untidy stubbornness of snow  
how like the shreds of matriarchy it lingers  
wherever there is a little shade

I had forgotten  
the terrible blind deaf tenderness of snow  
its impartial loving, how it wraps  
every weary tree from the wind

how even trampled, dirtied, it shines  
how shining it promises  
rain, green, how it promises rivers in the sun  
the summer and the far winter to come:  
in the ice, embedded, the covenant of spring

## CODA

she would have taken up weapons  
to keep her child from harm  
she gave me love and truth; now  
born into this war I see how  
I could have come no better armed

### Some Notes on Banshees

Banshee is the Anglicized spelling of the Irish phrase bean (or ban) sidhe, 'woman of the fairies'. The Banshee is best known for her wild and terrible wail, which heralds the death of a king or chieftain. At times, however, instead of wailing, she would show herself to the doomed man in the guise of a woman washing bloodstained clothes (usually his own) in a stream or pool. She is known throughout both Goidelic and Brythonic Celtic tradition.

In Ireland the Banshee is associated with the minor goddess Aine; but even the Irish Great Goddess, the Morrigan, is said to have foretold the death of kings by allowing Herself to be seen as a mysterious washerwoman. In Wales she is the Gwrach y Rhybin, 'the Crone from (?)', and has not only voluminous black robes but also huge bat-like wings. In Celtic Scotland they call her the nigheag na h-ath, 'the washer at the ford', and there she is said to have webbed feet. Across the Channel in Brittany, death is imminent for anyone who comes across one of the cannered noz, or 'night washerwomen'.

There is much evidence of a pre-Indo-European matriarchal tradition in all these variant Celtic cultures. They all frequently refer to the Fair Folk or fairies (Irish sidhe, pronounced 'she') as The Mothers; in Brittany they are nos bonnes meres les fees. In Wales the Wild Hunt (a fearsome phenomenon commemorated in folklore throughout Europe) is called Cwn Mamau, 'the Dogs of the Mothers'. It seems entirely reasonable to suppose that the Little People or Fair Folk are in actuality a mythic recollection of the various tribes of Picts -- a small-statured, dark, peaceable indigenous people who were enslaved and slaughtered by the invading Indo-Europeans.

In this light the Banshee hardly strikes me as an ululating mourner or servile laundress; the fear with which she is remembered is evidence of her magical power and (I think) vengeful spirit. It is well-known that most spells of revenge and destruction require the ritual use of the enemy's hair, skin, or personal possessions; I wonder what exactly the Banshee was up to with her enemy's clothes, down by running water at night. Who can say whether her chilling howl was not the ritual expression of the unspeakable rage and grief experienced by those ancient Goddess-Queens of Pictdom when the taller and better-armed invaders came raping and butchering their way across the green hills of home? Certainly the victorious kings lived in fear of her voice and of her ability to foretell (or was it to ordain?) their deaths.

I am part Pict and part Celt, by rough demographic reckoning. In the Essex marshes, where my mother and all her family were born, the people tend to a slighter build and darker complexion (and a higher incidence of webbed feet!) than in the rest of England; there is a long history of witchcraft in that region, and of persecution by the Church. It is possible that, just as the Basques fled into the inaccessible Pyrenees before the Indo-Europeans, the untechnological and unwarlike Picts retreated into the treacherous marshlands. At any rate, both witchcraft and a deep and abiding resistance to patriarchy run in my mother's history and mine.

The Banshee's howling is to me the voice of centuries of rage and sorrow, the voice of my own awaking to the untenable conditions of life as several thousand years of male supremacy have made it. The howling embodies both knowledge and self-expression -- two things rigourously denied to women and all colonized peoples. They are the two things most dangerous to kings; for kings know that knowledge (of one's history, of one's loss) means anger, and that when the anger and grief of the enslaved find voice, there is change in the wind and often the end of kingly privilege and power. It does not surprise me that kings were very much afraid of Banshees.

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