



Lawrence Kessenich – Five Poems

A Boy Made of Paper

Football coach with five o'clock shadow,
garage mechanic, Lucky Strike burning
between yellowed fingers, policeman
with pistol strapped casually to hip,
my father in his army uniform.

Beside them I was flimsy, didn't know
a tie rod from a bow tie. These men
ruled my circumscribed world with their
mechanical intelligence, muscles,
guns, steel and elbow grease.

They made things, killed things. I flexed
my paper wings, put miles of fantasy
between us. When ordered, I returned
to reality, but only as
an observer. I couldn't fix a car

or even a lamp, but I could fix
a sentence, and lived to see my father
envy that. The world needs its machines
and buildings, but, "In the beginning was
the Word, and the Word was made flesh."

Newspapers, Land Lines & Fireflies

Some things we took for granted from the start—that the newspaper would always bounce against the door in the morning, that we would always have the graceful curve of a telephone to nestle beneath our chin, that fireflies would light up the night no matter how dark the world became. It was dark then, too, the threat of Hiroshima hanging over us, the recent memory of Hitler's legions marching to *Gotterdammerung*. The Russians had the same intentions, we were certain, and the Chinese weren't far behind. The newspaper brought it all to us in stark black and white—invasions of North Korea and Hungary, confrontations at the Berlin Wall, Communist-backed revolutions in Africa and Southeast Asia. But we were in America, free to cradle a Princess phone on our shoulder while we read each other op-eds with opposing views, free to celebrate our freedom with sparklers and cherry bombs on the 4th of July while fireflies did their gentle imitation of fireworks on the other side of the meadow. The Russians fell, and we, it seems, will not be far behind, while the Chinese rise like a flock of birds in the night. Fewer and fewer of us read this in the paper, which is now colorful as a circus poster. We get our news online and text our friends, phone calls having somehow become an imposition. And when our fingers get tired of clicking characters, we go out into the dark, watch the dying glow of fireflies who, it seems, are evolving away from lighting up—like all of us, trying to elude the predators.

The First Debate

What upset me was
Barack looked old and tired,
graying hair a little grayer,
shoulders stooped, head bowed
before Romney's confidence—
the confidence of a man whose current
profession is campaigning, who
prepared for this debate like
a well-bankrolled prizefighter
intent on the heavyweight title.

Barack looked like the kind of guy
Barack wants to help, the middle-class
worker exhausted from a day of hard
work at the factory, a bit sad, a bit
whiny, wanting nothing more than to
open a beer, kick back on the sofa
and watch TV—if only
there were something on
besides this fucking debate.

A Rookery in Strokestown

In the night blackness around Strokestown Park House our hosts, Jim and Grace, respond to the soft caws of disturbed rooks by disturbing them even more, cawing and clapping. “We’d like to scare them away,” says Jim. “They shit on everything.” But the rooks’ high nests, like lookouts on the masts of ships, will still be there when we next return to Ireland.

From their vantage they have watched Anglo-Irish overlords rise and fall, presided in their mourning clothes over The Great Hunger and deportation, flapped black wings like so many angels of death when an angry shot felled Major Mahon of Strokestown Park House, the first landlord assassinated for his sins.

But this week their role is creative, not reactive. Like Poe’s raven they inspire poets to write of nature, history, the interconnectedness of man and animal—shit and all. In the thick darkness they call out plaintively as they rise from their nests, like thoughts and images whirling about in the unconscious, searching for a place to light.

PhotoShopping My World

First, I would adjust my waistline,
rubbing out those fifteen extra pounds.
Then I'd return my pecs to their
Nautilus-sculpted glory. The hair
would be okay, but I would repair
my droopy eyelid, which makes me
look a little drunk.

I'd position Charlize Theron on one arm,
Courtney Cox on the other. I'd be tempted
to put myself in the Oval Office, if only
to wipe the smirk from GW's face, but instead
I'd be on a terrace, the Amalfi Coast
spread out before me, a perfect glass

of red wine in my hand, my oft-used
writing table resting beside me,
National Book Award displayed for inspiration.
There would be no pollution in my sky,
just clouds borrowed from Georgia O'Keefe,
the sun shining through just so.

If I could go further, I would erase
vampire bats, poisonous snakes,
mosquitoes and the New York Yankees
(not necessarily in that order),
put my son at his drum kit behind
Bill Frisell and my daughter at a
writing table not unlike my own.

Further still, and I would put God on
on one of Georgia's clouds, leaning back
like an old man in an easy chair,
forgiving sins, dispensing grace
and blessing every pixel.

Lawrence Kessenich won the 2010 Strokestown International Poetry Prize. His poetry has been published in *Sewanee Review*, *Atlanta Review*, *Poetry Ireland Review* and many other magazines. His chapbook *Strange News* was published by Pudding House Publications in 2008. In 2012, his poem “Underground Jesus” received a Pushcart Prize nomination. His first full-length book, *Before Whose Glory*, was published by FutureCycle Press in March 2013. Kessenich has also published essays – one of which was featured on NPR’s *This I Believe* in 2010 and appears in the anthology *This I Believe: On Love* – and he has had plays produced in New York, Boston and Durango, Colorado.