

Poems by Christopher Keaveney

The Fine Art of Shenanigans

Unencumbered
The keen ascends,
fattening to hullabaloo.
Under the refuge of a shawl
an old woman rocks
akimbo in her grief,
banshee teeth crooked
in something like a grin.

In my folding chair
at the back of the waking room
I finger a photo
of me as a boy
crowded by a man
they wanted me to call
Uncle Squid,
a man who arrived in front of the house
like clockwork in a truck
once every three years.

Himself laid out
in all his glory,
a life lived beneath
the brim of a tweed cap
under faded eaves,
Inwood and Washington Heights,
the copper of blood on his lips
after another scuffle with the cops
on a block where
everyone was an enemy.

In the absence
of a father,
it was his job

to give me the belt,
beating three years' worth of a boy's mischief
out of me.

I would relish the game,
the zig and zag
from room to room,
his heart not in it,
a tired shaking of the head,
fulfilling righteous duties.

Later there would be ice cream
and apologies in the shape of mumbles,
a conspiracy of winks
across the table,
letting the drinks fizz
to mask our relief.

Grant me this one absolution,
a backward glance
to an old woman left wheezing
in the corner and beyond
to you in front of the Parkgate Tavern,
Your right hand raising a Rheingold in mock salute,
the left upturned as supplicant,
gap-toothed Maitreya,
the hint of a rakish grin
from under the shadow of your visor.
Always the last laugh.

You Are Forgiven

For the incense
that clings to you like dread
and for the abstinence
that might be a foreshadowing
of flowers lost
in the half light of dusk
on a road bent on recession.

I had almost forgotten
the prognosis,
an elevation of legs
underwater,
when autumn ceased to matter
to a young man
good with machines
for whom the blues weren't nearly
what they seemed.

Summerstock: A Triptych

The first one is insular
like a kiss during wartime,
the clemency of the fractured rib
for an aging boxer
down but not out.

Sunlight is hardship
for the sightless
in the second act.
The warmth that was the sepia
Of a mother's kiss.

On three
an old man's memory
of a barbershop quartet
heard on a summer's evening
is one kind of sanctity,
these torn jeans,
the torque of the falling branch
in my hands
yet another.