

Vona Groarke

LAMENT FOR ART O'LEARY

*from the Irish of
Eibhlín Dubh Ní Chonaill*



Gallery Books

Lament for Art O'Leary

EILEEN

Husband,
when you stood out that market day
my eyes settled on you.
I knew I would have you
if it meant
stepping out of my whole life,
carrying nothing with me.

Not that that mattered anyway.
You led me through rooms
that whitened as we walked,
had a blaze of comforts stoked for me
whenever I desired.
You shook out your house for me,
had bedrooms chastened
and kitchens stacked.
You had mackerel hooked for me,
lambs fattened on silky grass for me,
loaves shaped like the sun and moon for me
and women on hand to see to it all,
to pour and knead and clean.
All I had to do was turn over
in my hand-spun nets of sleep.

My dear,
I picture you with sunlight
tied around your head
like a band of gold,
every crease and angle of you —
from your silver-hilted sword
to your fine-trimmed mount —

a compliment to that spring day
and what it had to offer you.
Even the English lowered their eyes
from the vision of you
on your foreign horse.
Not that that mattered in the end:
it wasn't their eyes that undid you.

You were every inch the heir
of the Earls of Antrim
and the upright Barrys of Imokilly,
but you were still
the footloose suckling calf
that had warmed
my breasts that morning.

My white-gloved horseman,
I'd have watched you forever
in your cambric and laces,
your worsted and leather,
your hand-stitched shoes
and your Austrian breeches
that showed off your
sleek, powerful thighs
astride the brown mare
that was a match for you
in vigour and elegance.

My soft-fingered Art,
the light glinting off
your golden brooch
reached me all the way

over the sea.
And when you followed
in your finery
I thought that selfsame
blaze of yours
would blind
even the English
in our streets.
Not that it mattered in the end:
it wasn't their eyes that undid you.

My love,
when I go back home to them
little Conor and the stripling, Fiach,
will ask what I have done with you,
where I have hidden their father.
I will have to find words to say to them
that you are not hidden and you are not hiding
unless it is in Kilnamartyr,
from where no father comes home.

My Art,
I wouldn't give the time of day
to rumour of your death
until that selfsame mare of yours
came to me with her bridle awry,
her withers smattered
with your heart's damson,
and the polished saddle,
where I last saw you bolt upright,
lopsided and bereft.

My first spurt
took me clean over
your side of the bed.
The second got me to the gate,
the third up on her back.
I slapped my hands
to set her going
and she took off
at a heedless pace
that didn't spill one second
until she carried me
to the single furze
where your dear body
slumped.

No priest was on hand
to whisper prayers,
no monk to sing your praises,
only a dry-eyed, sorry, old woman
to throw a bare coat over you.
Art O'Leary,
I knelt down beside you.
I plunged my two fists
in your spilled blood
and sucked from my useless fingers.

Husband,
get up and follow me home.
I'll have dinner made for you
of venison and claret.
I'll fill the house
with your admirers.

I'll have music played for you.
When you've had your fill of that
I will turn down a bed for you
of cashmere blankets and speckled quilts
to draw the cold out of your bones
that this north wind has frozen.

ART'S SISTER

My treasure,
not a single woman
from Cork to Toames
with her money to hand
and a purse to offer
would have chosen to refuse you.
Not a single woman
worth her salt
would take herself off
to sleep in her room
the night you were waked.