

POETRY SELECTED BY KATHY MILES

Magnificat for the lady on the scaffolding

Miss Martin is building her own scaffolding
Michelangelo of Angell Town Brixton.

You can see a wrench in the pocket
of that virginal pale blue overall dress

for she has no assistant but her sister Madge
one of nine Irish siblings

and the master-mosaicist is not one
for modern studio techniques

but practises the direct method of the ancients,
learned from visits to Italy

paid from her own purse
though she still lives at home)

laying the tesserae on panels
of beeswax and linseed.

Now she places the blue Venice smalti
for Mary's mantle, halfway up to heaven,

and she'll trust no one but herself for the face
of awe and fear and love

as the Mother collects the puzzling tributes
and ponders all the mysteries in her heart.

Miss Martin is building her own scaffold
but with her next commission her purse will be filled

when her saints in the Palace of Westminster
take the eye of Mrs Churchill

who'll make sure she gets her reward
with a government pension.

So raise a lily for Gertrude Martin –

for her lowliness was exalted.

Kathryn Southworth

sundial for Ann Enys

the sun's work
is to remember you
Ann

for almost two hundred years
he has sent
shadow messengers
to spell the hours

the sundial is mobbed
by shrubs now
mere twigs
when the granite plinth
was first set here

we trace the dial's
graven hour-marks

your mansion behind us
(taxed for eight hearths)
has been empty for decades
a shadow's breadth away from dereliction

grandeur of empty rooms
their presumption lost
library
with a few remnant books
drawing room vast tarnished mirrors

a house quiet as you
Ann
or your sundial
this view over the park
or the sea beyond

we used to come
to Enys
every spring
to see the bluebells
in the old meadow
unploughed
for nine hundred years

earth relishing the rain
random bursts and quivers
sun's sword-blades glinting

today
muddy paths
lead us by lily pond
and rusted waterwheel

the ancient freestanding wisteria
in bloom
holds itself up by many knees
and elbows
of branch and trunk

the birdbath's
big as
and possibly was
a cathedral font

but all water is holy
says a rain glitter
says the standing water
in the square stone basin

the towering mockernut tree
came from America
but who brought it here
planted it
we'll never know
says my companion
staring up

into green gainsay
of this sky-nudger of Enys
who spells the hours
with the same fidelity
as dial
and waterwheel
for Ann for anyone

Enys is one of the oldest gardens in Cornwall, with a bluebell pasture said to have been unploughed for nine hundred years. The big house at Enys has been uninhabited for many years, though it is believed a restoration programme is to commence. I live in nearby Falmouth and have been visiting Enys every spring since 1970.

Penelope Shuttle

Miniature Burial

Current Archaeology 373 'Mourning in Miniature'

Four thousand years ago a baby died.

We know so little:

boy or girl,

fair hair or black?

Eyes: blue or brown?

And what brought death down,

from stalking the ridgeway,

to threaten a valley

where circular homes huddled

against all things dark?

There are too many questions.

Who dug the grave

in the infill from the ring trench?

Who made the baby-sized beaker with such care

decorating it with simple sloping lines?

Was it wet and cold with mourners

struggling through mud or

hot and sunny

with the grave diggers

sweating and needing to drink?

We know so little,

but we can nurture this certainty

cupped in our hands

like a precious flint.

Four thousand years ago a mother cried.

Jenny Hamlett

Quarry woman

What did she bring in a carrier's cart

or the hold of a ship?

a trunk full of linen

crockery

a precious picture

what folded memories

did she leave behind?

child bearing child raising

her practice and habit of work –

scrubbing washing ironing

flat irons heating

on an iron black range

tending hens in a back yard coop

cooking and gathering

berries

crab apples

mushrooms

making patchwork and proddy rugs

not a scrap of her life

wasted

she's found

in the doorstep's

hollow tread

the smoothed dip

in the slate flags

where she stood at the sink

in the last layer

of flowery paper next to rough plaster

a strand of hair

a trace of her DNA.

Mary Robinson