

RITA ANN HIGGINS: A MODERATOR'S VIEW

by Catherine Paul

It was with delight and fear that I opened an envelope from Rita Ann Higgins and read the reference to my own conference paper at the beginning of the second stanza of her new poem, "The Clemson Experience." Attendees of her Friday afternoon reading at the Southern Regional meeting of the American Conference for Irish Studies may remember her mystified response to the golf carts scurrying around the course attached to the Madren Center—"like something out of Star Wars," she mused, adding a fear that "Golfers are going to take over." I like to think that when she took her morning walks on the course's paved paths, in deliberate defiance of shouted prohibitions from the groundsmen, her dramatic swath of red hair startled those on the course as much as they did her. Those carts, however, fared better in her poem than the course's regulations for proper attire—she described them as a poetic gift handed her on a platter—and better than us academic types who "heaneyed time" in the Madren Center's meeting rooms, pontificating on Irish literature and culture. "Don't take anything I say in the poem only with a pinch of salt," she warned in the accompanying her poem written after the conference.

"Poems don't come that often," she commented at her reading before she recited "Weather Beaters," published for the first time here. You can read her excitement at the coming of a poem in her description of winos emboldened by spring, moving across the green in front of her house. But she refuses to make this poetic process anything mysterious: "I am inspired by the people from the next street, the person at the bus stop, the man in the shop. So what. Who cares." A visit from Jehovah's Witnesses in "God Dodgers Anonymous" unleashes "a new line in idolatry" from the woman who answers their knock, a response that leaves the Witnesses "flummoxed." She answers their question, "Have you a God?":

It depends
on how you look at it,
I haven't a pot to spew libations in
yet the Gods are hopping up
all over the joint,

and funny thing
it's never
with chalice and host,
it's always
with book and pen;
sometimes a sugary grin.

The Witnesses attempt a quick escape with the throw-away "Have a nice day," only to be

barraged again with a lengthy assurance from the woman that she will, a day that will include “dodging the Gods / round the grand piano / that isn’t really there” and catching a view of three of the horsemen of the Apocalypse, the fourth in the hospital for a hip operation. Other poems grow from responses to the various subversive people wearing cardigans, or from the tales one tells a hairdresser to justify a fancy hair-do that’s not meant for a dance at all, but a preparation for a potential surprise visit: “I always / have my hair done / so I can look good / in the bath / in case / Kim Basinger / calls round.” The poignancy of so many of these poems comes from their setting in those events we could all do without yet find ourselves too often having to endure: views of sickeningly good-looking couples, excuses for unpayable rent, secrets one regrets telling one’s friend, dealings with neutered cats, the unwanted mothering advice women give each other. It is this mixture of ordinary situations and extraordinary imaginative ruminations that give her poems their power.

The insights that her poems offer into life as it too often happens make me dismiss her claim, “I don’t see poets as necessarily having any wisdom.” The interactions between people in her poems, whether the briefest of conversations between two men installing a roof and a woman watching them, as in “Cloud Talker,” or between the mother and son in the poem of that title printed here, step quickly beyond these simple moments of engagement to convey something of what it means to reach another person. Her poems often show a discrete distrust of poetry and the falsehoods it can protect. For instance, in “Donna Laura” she imagines a plague-stricken Laura berating Petrarch for his poeticized lies. Her tirade concludes:

O Petrarch, you poser,
 you were always swaggering
 in and out of the Papal courts.

As for the sonnets
 you were seen tearing them up
 and throwing them petal-like
 around the marketplace,
 the Pope thought your piss was lemonade.

Petrarch, may you get what I have,
 whoever rolled back that stone
 should have rolled it over your head.

Laura pokes holes in Petrarch’s poetic persona, not just with her dismissal of his lofty aspirations but also with the words she chooses, words we might imagine would shock him. Some of the pleasure of poems like these comes from Higgins’ insistence on colloquial idioms. The spoken quality of her poems came across even more powerfully in the reading than they do on the page. The dialogue of “Mother and Son” came from two voices within the same reader. The lists of “Some People” (printed in *The Independent* as their Sunday Poem in mid-April) and “Woman’s Inhumanity to Woman” took on a relentlessness when voiced that can be evaded in silent reading. And the rhyming and verbal play of “Why I refuse to be gracious,” a coeliac-disease sufferer’s apology for but nonetheless surrender to her small

intestine, proved even more irreverent aloud.

Rita has published six collections of poems, including *Goddess on the Mervue Bus* (1986), *Philomena's Revenge* (1992), *Higher Purchase* (1996), and most recently *Sunny Side Plucked* (1996), a collection of new and selected poems published by Bloodaxe Books and awarded a Poetry Book Society Recommendation. A group of sixteen poems from *Sunny Side Plucked* will appear in the forthcoming *Wake Forest Anthology of Contemporary Irish Women's Poetry*. She was Writer in Residence at University College, Galway, in 1995 and was until recently Writer in Residence in Tullamore, Co. Offaly. Her visit to the ACIS conference at Clemson was part of an extended tour of the southeastern United States that included visits to Florida, Tennessee, and Georgia. In addition to giving us a delightful reading, Rita kept us honest, alerting us, as poets often do, to our tendency to get mired in critical verbiage, little shards of bog body trapped between our teeth.

Editor's Note: All quotations from the poetry of Rita Ann Higgins are taken from *Sunny Side Plucked*.