

KATHRYN KIRKPATRICK

MAEVE MARRIED

I demanded a strange bride-gift such as no woman before me had asked of a man . . . to wit, a husband without meanness, without jealousy, without fear.

From "Tain Bo Cualnge," *Book of Leinster*

*Because she wanted a life
as filigreed with wonders
as any man's, they decided
she couldn't have loved him.*

1

How to account for her?
Daughter of a High King?

Shall we give birth that privilege,
apply chromosome to gene
like a knife to a leek?

But accidents of birth solve nothing.
They are flame to a sharp stone.
Born a warrior or raised one,
she heard the usual complaints:

*I would never give in
to a woman, be under
a woman's rule.*

*Following the lead
of a woman has brought us
to this distress.*

Even Ailill insisted: *Good
is the wife of a good man.*

Reduced to anatomy,
she felt like a trout

cut on red sandstone.

Is it any wonder
she took up seduction
and the sword?

2

He left her
the hard choices.

Three enchanted monsters
in the shapes of cats.
Three men, competing,
of course.

Who's best?

That toxic question. Ranking
and judging. Conall and Laegaire

climb the rafters. Cuchulain,
as usual, strikes when provoked,
sits through the night, watching.

Who wins?

Ailill's voice slips
like a sword off stone:

danger in whatever judgement

He'll take the perks
of kingship, manhood,
not the consequences.

She's left holding
the bronze, silver, and gold.

3

But aren't we tired, really tired
of that old story?

A woman tries to hold fast
to a man. Her life

becomes a small chamber.
How many hours each day

does she give to fear?
Books unopened, friendships
unspoken, words unwritten—

each unlived day like a sty,
reddening, dimming her view.

This much seems clear:
Maeve never thought the love
of a man alone could save her,

but Ailill released her from fear:
He loved her directly as daylight.

Together they built a house
of oak, fitted with bronze,
red yew carvings.

Flocks of white birds
might rise from the Hill of the Sidhe
withering all they touched,
enchanted pigs could trample
the earth barren.

But Ailill and Maeve shone
like bronze pillars,
struck and vibrating.

4

They both understood desire
for a beautiful woman,

her skin soft as feathers,
her mouth the beginning
of the world.

When Angus Og
described years of longing,
they felt their own pulses
beat like wings. A woman

in their district,
hair the color of sky
at dusk.

Who cares she was nothing
but trouble, under some fool
enchantment, one year herself,
the next a wren, herself again,
then pheasant or starling or sparrow.

Listening to Angus Og's desire,
their hearts rose up like song.
Later they gave their bodies
to each other as if
they themselves might be more
than earthbound flesh.

And though some thought it
merely politic when Maeve and Ailill
forced the secret of her spell,
it was more impulse than plan.

They flew toward consummation,
flutter of tongue, hum of thigh.
Not themselves, they made
themselves utterly at home.

Angus Og reaped the transformation,
became a swan, which was, after all,
the variety of bird his beloved
had most recently become.

5

She was blamed for the weakness
of the men of Ulster

as if her strength
could only be stolen,
an easy theft, from men.

But their own cruelty
betrayed them.

When enemies closed in
the men of Ulster felt
their arms refuse to lift swords.
Pain seared their bellies
and their legs trembled
as if they had been walking
for days.

They were cursed for forcing
a woman to outrun horses.
They had threatened her.
Her husband would die.

When she fell to the ground
and gave birth, the boy and girl
awash with blood, her cry pierced
the bodies of birds and lodged
in the ringed trunks of trees,

lodged in the throats
of the men themselves
who were suddenly spent.

Neither making life nor taking
life, they felt weak.
But Maeve had nothing to do with it.

6

Fergus was different.
He walked away from king and country

for love of a woman
he could not have.

Like a serpent swallowing
its own tail, Maeve asked him
for what would dissolve
armies and thrones
if every man gave it,
love beyond borders, the heart
opening to what it most needs,
another heart to change it.

When Ailill understood
that his wife's body
was not entirely his own,
he responded with tact,
even wit. Carving a sword
from oak, he slid it into Fergus'
sheath, lifted the real blade
from among scattered clothes.
The hilt caught in Maeve's
robe, and for a moment
Ailill felt the earth
tilt, and ache in his body
deeper than sleep.

7

She had never met a man
who neither feared nor desired her.

When he came to Connaught
with the men of Ulster,
the sound of their horses
was like thunder on the roof.

Dark, he wore crimson, a brooch
of inlaid gold. Over his shoulders
a shield rimmed in silver.

His confidence scoured her
like a loud wind in winter.
He had lain with women of the Sidhe.

He had never lost a battle.

She offered food, ale, vats
of cold water, a ready bed.
He looked through her
as if she were mist.

Later when Maeve sent armies
against him, and Cuchulain had killed
many men, she imagined kneeling
before him, her arms circling his thighs,
her mouth busy, his voice unharnessed
from its burden of strength,
wild and ungovernable.

8

Didn't she speak to the eel
of every color? She dipped
the bronze cup into the river
and brought up the mauve head,
the saffron tail:

What way is it with you?

For a moment
she was only herself
in love with the world.
The story alone was enough:

*Two swineherds transform into eels
and are drunk down by cows.
The cows give birth to bulls,
the white-horned and the Brown.*

Men in the bellies of bulls.
Brilliant eels speaking.
The whole of life, enchanted,
before her

and she chose the game
of status:

*What will happen to me
after I get the sway
over Connaught?*

9

Here is the hardest thing:
to change the old ways
of living.

Knowing what she knew
about women reduced to flesh,
Maevae bartered her daughter
anyway: *sixty black grey horses
with golden bits and twelve mulch cows
with red-eared calves.*

She sat past dark
with her daughter's lover,
playing chess, her gold queen
catching the last of the light,
the young man's hands beautiful
against the white bronze of the chessboard.

His dark hair curled at his jaw.
They argued about the marriage portion.
When their eyes met, she felt
a chilled wave.

Candle flames lanced
emeralds and rubies.
The dinner hour lapsed

and she forgot husband and kingdom,
forgot her own daughter,
her body bolder than the future.

Was it her unkissed lips
that drew her to Ailill's plan?
When Fraech left her check-mated,
hungry, the silver pawns scattered,

she recalled the prophecy:

death by water the Druids said.
How unmeasured the desire
that led her to the bank
of that river, Fraech flailing,
water snakes thick in the current.

10

If only he hadn't begun
Good is the wife of a good man.

She might have chosen silence.

But when he said: *You are better
today than the day I married you,*

she saw a gored bull in the twilight.

*I was good before I ever
had to do with you*

and with that the great tally began,
how many horses, what price
the jewels, which robe finer,
her property set beside his,
as if a world that had wounded her
could finally settle her worth.

Even the white-horned bull,
calved in Maeve's herd, refused
to be owned by a woman, chose
Ailill's herds instead.

The war in the north came to this:
she went looking for a bull
better than his though his bull
had once been hers.