

Vernon Watkins (1906-67)

7 *Ballad of the Three Coins*

I know this road like the back of my hand
From birth to the lonely sea
With a windblown dog and a bottle of sand,
And I count my curses three.

The birds of the sea hang high in the air 5
And the land-birds crowd the tree.
I go, they cannot tell me where,
But their cries were torn from me.

A mile beyond Red Chamber
Flashes a light of broken skies. 10
The mother-of-pearl of the winkle-shell
Runs back to drowned men's eyes.

I take this first of the paths which run
Seaward from the thorny wood.
Flocks of starlings darken the sun, 15
And the moon is in my blood.

Swollen shoes, a pole and a pack,
And three considered coins;
A pain in the head, a pain in the back,
And a great pain in the groins. 20

They say the dawn brings learning
And the midnight, love.
The sun and the moon should teach me;
The stars should dig my grave.

But the bones that are I are the bones of a man 25
Walking between two lives.
The three coins of the Furies
Leap on the road of knives.

The first coin spins in the light of Dawn.
I see it glint and burn. 30
There is eager thought in those patient eyes.
Athene, O, your turn.

‘Go to the field and you will find
A woman milking a cow.’
Beautiful dawn, instruct me: 35
Dawn, and the olive-bough.

I passed a field where they buried a man.
A dark priest in a cowl
Prayed above his body,
And over him swept an owl. 40

Then I came, I came to a five-barred gate
Where a slow sight held me still.
A woman was gripping the teats of a cow,
A bucket waiting to fill.

The curse of Earth is the curse of the beggar. 45
Intellect breaks his sleep.
No books in the world will slake that thirst,
So swift it is, and deep.

I raised the white milk high on my head
Where it shone like Solomon’s crown. 50
That world would have stood for ever,
But the second coin pulled me down.

The second coin spins in the light of Noon.
I see it glint and burn.
There is jealous arrogance in those eyes. 55
This is Juno’s turn.

‘Go to the stream and you will find
A queen where the light is strong.’
Beautiful noon, instruct me:

Noon, and the cuckoo's song. 60

I went, I went to the faltering stream,
And a rare sight held me back.
A woman bathed from the water's edge,
Stopped me in my track.

I fixed my eyes on her. At once 65
Jealousy ran through my blood.
Her proud beauty was the sun's,
Her brood the eagle's brood.

I could not cross the stepping-stones
For jealousy jumped on my back. 70
I cursed the crone on my great back-bone.
I cursed her white and black.

O stint and glint of the jealous flint,
O pride of the flashing crown!
What was the good of a haughty queen? 75
A beggar cannot lie down.

At last I managed my way across
That crooked, evil stream,
And I found a stone with a little green moss
And a lost, illegible name. 80

I stretched my legs and my heart was still;
I fixed my eyes on a tree;
When the third great pain got hold of me,
The worst of those bad three.

O let me be, you women! 85
O my coins were curses three.
The first I carried, the second I buried,
The third I'll cast to the sea.

The third coin spins in the Starlight.
O where are the first two gone? 90

Come down, engendering darkness.
A wild dog leads me on.

What rest is there on the love-starved Earth
When the sea is starved for love?
Beautiful Night, instruct me: 95
Night, and the turtle-dove.

‘Run down, run down to the yellow-white foam,
A naked girl you will see
Who will take that last coin from you,
The worst of those bad three.’ 100

To the beach I went, I went to the rock,
I stood where the limpets clung.
The salt blood sprang at my heart’s great knock,
And now the salt wind stung.

What have I come to win from death 105
Girding up my loins?
Swollen shoes, a pole and a pack,
And the last of three bad coins.

What if, when I come to the yellow-white foam,
Nothing I can see 110
But a bottle up to its neck in sand
And a wet dog peeled by the sea?

O what of Athene’s halo
And what of Solomon’s crown?
And what of Juno’s jealous love? 115
A beggar cannot lie down.

But now by the yellow-white foam I stand,
And all is altered, all is changed,
All that logic of the land
Ravished and deranged. 120

The barren bears the fruits of the Earth

And the fruit bears barrenness.
The sun and the moon know nothing,
And between them I know less.

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