

At the Roots of the Stars by Djuna Barnes
libretto adaptation by Cal Folger Day

1 MAGEEN Is it raining yet child?

Since the day before yesterday. MAZE

Ah, ha, people no longer go to work with dry shirts;
the boy going by in the early dawn
are nothing but a line of wet wash.

Well, it's them that are the happy ones, I'm thinking,
with their pails of beer over their arms
and their trade beneath their feet.

I hear a sound of great building away to the west.

What might it be?

A new boat, a new house—who can tell?

2 It is glad I am
that there are men in the world
who keep bracing the beams of the past
and making things new the while—
a glad woman I'd be, Maze, this day,
and me with my veins swelling up like grapes,
if it wasn't for the trouble of some of the friends I have.

*You speak as though you were a queen on a great throne instead of the landlady of a dirty inn that's stale
with the cigar butts of yesterday, and damp with the tears of women.*

3 Ah, true it is
that our prayers are longer than our time to sin.
So little time we have to open our mouths;
so short the space in which to kiss or kill.
I so regret the tongue is of such insufficient length
for the ridiculing of the world.

Yet I am one of those women who come into the grand,
and go out of it brave.

Aye, you're well enough.

I am that.

What's the use of being otherwise?

I am a heavy ship with my cargo of troubles,
but I am riding easily, and will ride.

Sometimes I'm thinking you have too much pride, with your light heart and your hopefulness.

But it's a little pebble you are and I a heavy stone,
and you'll be but a pinch of dust when I am still an obstacle.

You're a bitter thing; you'd better be sipping your beer instead of making fun of an old woman who counted her gray hairs before you had down to count, and was snapping her teeth before there were problems at all.

4

Well, well, what of your girl Sarah today?

It was a fine creature she used to be,
full of the lust of ruined fields and the joy of life,
and the birds flying behind her like moving embroidery against the sky,
and she walking between them and the sun,
making wine as she walked of the grass, the grain, and the dust.

She's little enough now but a blond thing that has left the colors of her heart along the ways she has walked, so that her past is autumn and her face winter.

5

I like to hear the hammers falling there in the upper world
with a sound to them as though they fell on wet wood,
damp with the spray of an alien sea,
and the gray brightness is an English day always,
that lies thick and heavy on the lip,
like a kiss is taken with tears beneath the eyelid.

Mayhap it's a pier, a boat or a house they're building.

6

It's getting chill, Maze, put a log on the fire.

It's a long time I've been lying here on my back beneath the world

in this cellar,
listening to the people all walking over my head,
like a corpse that has flung the loam out of its ears
and tossed the pennies from its eyes.

It's no wonder you are sick always, and you beneath the house and beneath man, and hid from the stars.

It's glad I am to be at the roots of the stars,
for it's the roots get the truth.

The sun coming out for a moment may deceive the flower,
but the root know the lie.

How long is it you have been staring at the ceiling there?

7

Ever since Ulan went away, singing a great song and a fine,
with the tommies trotting behind like a pinch of pollen that does be following the breeze.

And it's here I'll be lying when he comes back again
after learning life in this great street that ends in the arms of death.

And it's a fine boy he will be when he comes back to tell me
in words as profitable as the king's
what's being done that's a glory to man in the world outside.

8

Perhaps he has a woman who loves him.
For women need a great man to sing a little song above.

Perhaps she's a wench selling fish in the market place.

So much the better.

What one knows of the sea is well, if only by the taste on the tongue;
all that's in life passes through us utterly.

The flower through the gateway of our eyes;
the fish and the fine fruits and the ripe wine by way of our mouth;
every phrase is clothed in the winding sheet of some dead thing,
and through the arches of our ears
walks forever the music of creation.

We are but a net, that quivers when the wind passes
and shudders when the storm breaks,
and in the end is torn utterly with nothing caught but the drift—
wings of a bird, a petal a dead sunbeam we call a shadow.

Life is not like that at all; you're dreaming, Mageen. It's pitiless and hard, and it makes our children terrible and normal, and it makes our hopes dreadful and natural, and its sternness is very great, and its greatness very small.

9 Woman, don't you suppose I know?

It's only ten years I have put the world away
and have lain in this basement listening to the feet of the universe passing over me.

10 I remember well

the dray-men in the streets
selling their dirty fruit and their dried figs.
And it's well I remember the old-clothes men
handling their wares like ailments,
for all dresses are scabs from the wounds of that strife we call a living.

Aye, and what else do you recall?

Men with their heads like bowls of vanity,
set upon their necks, wherein eyes burn somberly
that will so soon be ash.
And the little girls running down past Wicklow's shop
for a sight of the window
where stood the wax doll that came from France;
and it austere and chic, with its high piled hair and its small ribs
pinched by old lace and Burgundy taffeta—
ah, it's indeed well I remember—

*But wouldn't you like to see it all again, you could and you wanted to, with the help of the girl Travna,
and a chair perhaps. Isn't it aching you are for a sound of the chatter of men?*

11 Why? For speech we are damned, are we not?

The one word the donkey speaks has branded him an ass!

Why should I bother looking into men's faces

when their feet tell the truth for them,

as the roots tell the truth of the day.

A man may be looking on heaven,

but if his feet are set on hell, they will give him away.

Can you tell that?

12

I can.

(cf. 9)

Why do you suppose I should have to listen to these years past;

to the frying of the fat in the pans of my boarders;

to the footfalls of those as pass over my head here?

(cf. 10)

Come and listen; this part of the house is beneath the street

and one can hear?

Well, do you be hearing?

But it tells me naught.

(cf. 11)

Because you have not listened, day on day,

for ten long years, waiting for the step you know will come.

Ulan's.

Yes, I shall know when he comes.

You don't remember?

13

Not remember? I remember when he used to walk upon my heart

before I gave him birth at all.

And it's I who knew his footfall before his feet knew the ways of walking.

Have I not listened to him coming in the stillness of the night,

when we were only one.

Like a vine his life crept at my side,

and it's not the old tree will forget the young,

that has sapped it of a strength that it might stand,

for an old tree is a glorious thing
when it rises dead and gray,
with the green leaves of its child shining upon it like the sun.

But after ten years?

14 A son does not change his walk,
any more than the leaves change their sound.

But so many feet, and so much alike?

You talk like those who have lived over-ground, not like those who have lived under, Maze.

15 Who can deceive me in the cadence of the coming of my son?
Not you, not the pavement, not time.

I hope to hear the foot grown into the foot of a man,
falling with the fire of purpose
and the magnitude of this earth that takes us and uncurls us,
and stretches us like the string of a harp,
and lets time play upon us, and in the end smites us back
into a circle of silence.

But while you're talking he might come one day.

16 It cannot be.
Life is too quiet for my noise to be drowned.
(cf. 3) There is nothing under heaven or earth, or above it, that is sound
excepting the crying of a child.
That's why for some there is a great silence,
filled with nothing but the throats of creatures not theirs,
using the tongues that ring in earless space, and eyes
that are little glasses turned toward the summit of your empty sky.

I do not know.

But it's I that know, and will know.

All things are strange because we have known them always.

Besides, he is a trifle lame.

No one but I would mark it.

But so many people are lame.

17 I shall know.
(cf. 14) A mother does not overestimate,
and he's the greatest of them all—

my son, with the bonny light on his air always,
and the ring in his voice that is like the page from a solemn book,
and his purpose mighty,
as the purpose of all who dream.

He's a light I set burning twenty years ago,
that was but a little candle then, but must be a blaze now,
for the winds of strife have fanned it high, I know—
ah it's much celebrating there will be the day Ulan comes.

18 And it's I whose lips are shaken with the fermenting wine of faith,
(cf. 5) and it's I whose heart is great and glad,
so that it lies upon the throat of my body like a diamond upon black cloth.

19 Hark!
(cf. 6) Ah God, it's him, Maze;

listen, do you hear?

Quick, quick, tell Travna to bring him to me!

20 Ah Ulan, I knew you would come back to me again
out of the sky where I hung you with tears and laughter;
and it's I who knew some day you would turn to me,
as the flower must return to the root.

And it's I, your mother, Ulan,

knew that those who called you wild would know you as good,
and those who called you bonny would call you beautiful,

and those who called you clever would hail you as noble.

And it's I, your mother, Ulan,

who knew that there was one road you would not walk without her knowing,

and that the road of her exceeding expectancy

and her impatient love.

Ma'am, I can't bring him in.

Why? Why?

Because it's a donkey, ma'am.

21 And it's I whose tears are too heavy for my eyes;
they fall upon my breasts and crush them;
they lie upon my sight, staggering drunkenly,
and form a drop of curious and wet despair—

22 spreading like a flood—as in a flood all but my laugh
(cf. 1) is drowned and broken like beaten grass—
the terrible quietness of nothing
that breaks the heart.

*The poor beast walked a little lame. They'd fettered him on the commons, too, where the grass is pale
and thin.*

23 It's getting chill.
(cf. 6) Is there aught left of the beer?