

Kathryn Kirkpatrick



photo by Joelle Wallach

Kathryn Kirkpatrick lives as I think a poet should -- at the top of a mountain in an artist-designed house that she and her husband have made even more artful and welcoming over the years. Surrounded by gardens, and in the company of two dogs and two cats, Kathryn writes remarkable, deeply felt, beautifully nuanced poems that range over the gamut of human experience -- poems rooted in mythology, in history, and in personal experience, in which her subjects are always brought powerfully and dramatically to life.

I came to know Kathryn when she was a freshman in the 1970s at Winthrop College. Even then, at the age of eighteen, her gifts were apparent to all who knew her; so multi-talented was she that her professors in every academic discipline tried to lure her into their specialties. She would undoubtedly have distinguished herself in any field she chose, but happily, for those of us who know her poems and for those who may just now be coming to them, she decided that literature would be her life's work -- the making of it and the teaching of it. Even as she finished her Ph.D. at Emory in Interdisciplinary Studies and British Literature, she was writing mature and insightful poems and publishing them in fine literary magazines. Now she has two superb collections, which have won prestigious awards, as well as two chapbooks; and she has won residency grants from the Tyrone Guthrie Centre, in Ireland, and the Eastern Frontier Society, in Massachusetts, among other honors. I am not surprised at the recognition she's getting for her poems. Nor am I surprised that she has managed to pursue her scholarly interests, regularly publishing books and articles in Women's Studies and Irish Studies. But it is for her poems themselves and for her friendship that I am happiest. I have seen some of her new, as yet unpublished work, and I am delighted to say: Keep an eye on this poet -- she will knock you off your feet. -- Susan Ludvigson

Susan Ludvigson is Professor of English at Winthrop University. Her published books include seven titles from Louisiana State University Press, most recently Sweet Confluence, New and Selected Poems(2000). Her next collection, Escaping the House of Certainty, will come out from LSU Press in the fall of 2006. She is a recipient of

fellowships from the Guggenheim, Rockefeller, Fulbright, and Witter Bynner Foundations; from the National Endowment for the Arts; and from the North Carolina Arts Council and the South Carolina Arts Commission. She has represented the U. S. at writers' meetings in France, Belgium, Canada, and Yugoslavia.

Class

For my high school graduation
we went to the Western Sizzler
where my father, telling no one,
had reserved a private room.

He never believed in his own kindness,
and so he said nothing when I chose
a regular table. I was ashamed.
My boyfriend usually ate
at the Steak and Ale.

My family had no debts. No stocks either.
Just the slow rise of a savings account
like water from a ceiling leak
into a rusty can.

But there were no leaks,
everything steadily tended
through long days of honest work
which left us at the end
of it all with only enough
for the chopped sirloin platter
and a room that stood empty
because we never arrived.

First American Woman Solos in a Fixed-Wing, Heavier Than Air Machine, 1910

I dreamed of flying under bridges
upside-down
or diving swift-like toward
the rushing ground at Curtiss Field.
He says
I'm just to check the wires, guide forward
and then back across the runway,

says if
crashed they'd blame his Pusher plane
or him.
To teach a woman how to lift
herself from earth in this frail fabric plane
is bad enough,
but flight, alone, intoxicates
like drink, like money, power.
So when I find
the throttle lever blocked and take
away the piece of wood,
I know the price
they'll pay, years on, to see me risk my neck,
a freak because I'm first.
My hands are ice.

Southern Dialectic

My uncles would make fun of my long *I*,
call it *Yankee*, something I'd put on
as if that diphthong might expand
into a self not consonant
with all the forthright syllables
of Southern/woman/working class.

I'd bristle with chronology:
a military kid, a childhood overseas,
humorless (as anyone might be)
sounding out identity from
Filipino, German, Texan drawl.
Who knows? Perhaps I had an ear
for what could silence me.

I'd stand in the red clay
of a southern afternoon,
sun blasted, alone, the heat
riding roughshod over me,
and pitch my voice into that swollen air.

It all comes back to me now.
It all comes back to me.

Kathryn Kirkpatrick lives in Vilas and is a professor of English at Appalachian State University. She holds a Ph.D. in Interdisciplinary Studies from Emory University, where

she received an Academy of American Poets poetry prize. Her first book of poems, The Body's Horizon (Signal Books, 1996), won the Brockman-Campbell award, selected by Alicia Ostriker. The North Carolina Literary & Historical Association awarded the Roanoke-Chowan Poetry Prize to her second collection, Beyond Reason (Pecan Grove Press, 2004). Chapbooks include Looking for Ceilidh (Mill Springs Press) and The Master's Wife (March Street Press). Her poems have appeared in Calyx, Carolina Quarterly, Epoch, Florida Review, Kalliope, Shenandoah, Sojourner, South Carolina Review, Southern Poetry Review, and other magazines. As a feminist scholar she has produced editions of the Irish and Scots novels Belinda, Castle Rackrent, Marriage, and The Wild Irish Girl for Oxford University Press's World's Classics Series. She is also the editor of Border Crossings: Irish Women Writers and National Identities (University of Alabama Press, 2000).