

All Lost things: A study of Gillian Clarke's Cold Knap Lake.

Janet S. Lewison

Gillian Clarke offers the reader a profoundly haunting insight about her poem and memory itself at the end of 'Cold Knap Lake.' She argues: 'All Lost things lie under closing water' which seems a very apt visual message when we consider the content and 'story' of the poem, as well as brilliantly encapsulating the elegiac concerns of both this individual poem and much of her other poetry. For this insight registers the fragile and problematic relationship between any act of voluntary remembrance and its unsettling shadow, the 'lost things,' the involuntary manifestation of the unassimilated past. Furthermore the verb 'lie' alerts us to the duplicitous tricks that memory might play upon poet and reader. In a poem concerned with the past, this verb reveals the fiction that 'lies' at the heart of recollection! The past is only ever finished, never finished with.

Before we move into an exploration of the role of recollection in the rest of Cold Knap Lake, it is worthwhile to reconsider the other half of Clarke's conclusion to the poem. For she ambiguously suggests that the 'lost things' are 'in that lake with the poor man's daughter.' Whilst it is comfortable to read the 'poor man's daughter' as the nearly drowned little girl, there is a strange ambiguity about the identity of this 'daughter.' For the only mention of a male figure in the poem is the poet's father, and whilst the adjective 'poor' is attributed to the home of the rescued girl, the progressive elision between the poet as spectator and the poet as spectacle: 'Was I there?' makes 'Cold Knap Lake's' ending strangely intimate and unresolved. I wonder where the elegiac concerns might finally 'lie.' As Eliot famously argued at the end of **The Wasteland**, 'These fragments I have shored against my ruins.'

If the poem is an elegy, it is quite likely that the voluntary act of remembrance that recalls this extraordinary 'resurrection' of a nearly drowned child, should resurrect and reanimate other emotions as well. Specifically I am talking about the poet's awe-struck relationship with her mother: 'a heroine, her red head bowed.' This feeling of awe for her mother is quite palpable in the poem. The peculiar attentiveness to the details of her mother's: 'soaked' frock and her; 'kneeling on the earth;' make the memory iconic of her mother's heroism and near mythical status within the family and local community. The details have a sensory

immediacy that reincarnates the event, yet also distances the poet painfully from the irretrievable past. As Susan Fletcher's heroine asks in the Whitbread Award Winning Novel **Eve Green** (also set in Wales): 'how could these things just vanish when they had been so real?'

Clarke's highly compressed elegy moves compellingly from the comparative safety of a dramatic family anecdote: 'We once watched a crowd,' where the writer is part of some community and family, to the destabilising solitariness of her unanswered question: 'Was I there?' This switch from the arresting focus upon the miraculous resurrection of a drowned girl, to the self-doubting unease about her presence, underlines the precarious relationship between memory and truth. For if the writer cannot respond with any certainty to her own question, then the poem forces the reader to re-examine our own anecdotal excursions into the past, where the presence of the familiar might mask 'things' far more affecting and demanding than we might care to acknowledge.

Perhaps the key to this tension between one type of truth and another, lies with the admission: 'my mother gave a stranger's child her breath.' The end stop after 'breath' communicates the miraculous gift bestowed upon the girl by the poet's mother. The wonder the poet feels at her mother's resurrection of the drowned child is evident. Perhaps there is also something jealous, thwarted or unresolved in this awe too? For Clarke's child self is bemused by the fact that the saved child is a 'stranger' to her mother, and thus takes a gift that is unwarranted away with her forever. This gift of life may no longer be available for the mother to give, for her mother's own 'breath' may be extinguished and the poet can only replay the past in order to re-access the now miraculous presence of her absent mother. In revisiting this story about her mother's resourcefulness and care, Clarke is literally resurrecting not only the story and the child of the story, but her mother and her relationship to her mother. In mourning others it is often true to say that we are mourning ourselves as 'lost things', and in these self-protecting or self-deceiving displacements, we may feel as drowned and as violated as the original child in the poem.

Now if, the poem does skirt at the edges of unfocused mourning, then this is why the final line of 'Cold Knap Lake' might seem so ambiguous in its focus: '..in that lake with the poor man's daughter.' We are aware of the blurring between spectacle and spectator, between the ostensible subject and object of the poem.

I have said that Clarke does not respond safely to her own question: 'Was I there?' In fact she responds highly evocatively: 'Or is that troubled surface something else...' Here, Clarke elides the surface of Cold Knap Lake itself with human consciousness. She has been precipitated into this uncertainty and elision through the final shocking denouement to the tale of the child's rescue: 'and watched her thrashed for almost drowning.' Human beings show relief in strange and often disturbing ways. We displace what we feel. Hence the disjunction between the poet's admiration of her mother's near messianic intervention at the drowning, and the unfamiliar environment and circumstances that follow the child's return home, which upsets the veil (or lens) by which this memory is being scrutinised and represented. The poet, like her much younger self, wonders at the reality of what is being enacted before her.

The oblique unravelling of the question: 'Was I there?' is perceptually bewildering as we read on into an evasive, slippery description that just might be a veiled metaphor for comprehension: 'where satiny mud blooms in cloudiness.' The seductive sensory murkiness of both sight and touch here, lures the reader away from the miraculous drama of the apparent 'event' of the poem, just as the original child had been enticed to her near death in Cold Knap Lake by its dangerously attractive appearance. The 'troubled' aspect of the Lake's surface serves as a key to the fact that the surface, like memory, veils dangerous 'things' that can endanger life, or our 'troubled' versions of our lives that might support all that we think we are.

Each time I read 'Cold Knap Lake,' I cannot help but feel that the poem is more about the loss of the poet's relationship and life with her mother, than the vivid details of a marvellous anecdote. The realisation that a well known family story has become a memorial to her past and her need for her past, suffuses the poem with an unresolved sadness. If we remember Clarke's description of her mother: 'Then kneeling on the earth,' does this language bear witness to her mother's simplicity and humility, or does it alert us (and the poet) to the fact that, like her 'breath,' the 'earth' is no longer something she enjoys? Like Heaney's use of the word 'globed' in his poem 'Follower' there is something monumental about Clarke's use of the word 'earth.' It testifies to parental power and singularity. Once again we are aware of the elegiac language and mood of this poem. As I said before, the past is only ever finished, never *finished with*.

When Clarke recreated Cold Knap Lake's War-time drama, she recreated a story that reminded her (and us!) of other stories. Her mother's status as icon is complex and powerfully orchestrated. For not only is she a healer and a heroine, she is also a Pre-Raphaelite Ophelia, who miraculously resurrected from her watery grave, saves another female from drowning the beautiful lingering death: 'Blue-lipped and dressed in water's long green silk/she lay for dead.' Clarke reanimates her mother as icon through glimpses or 'breaths' of other icons. She resurrects her mother, as her gift to her parent as a poet and daughter, thus preserving the 'fragments' of her mother's life-affirming vitality against the 'ruins' of forgetfulness and nullity. She captures the process of this meaningfulness through her 'heavy webs' of a memory that is sometimes sought and sometimes not: 'Cold Knap Lake' serves as a testimony to the reanimation and resurrection of love's lost things.