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Poems by Kerry Shawn Keys

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By The Blue House

On foot, I turned off the street
at the blue house with the white cat,
perched like a bird almost,
on the windowsill behind the glass.
Not a fixture or a still life,
but composed and nearly always there
as the Cheshire smile of our riddle.
A dilapidated, mossy brewery
scans the top of the knoll
in the direction of the Cathedral,
and the great river, out of sight, graces
the muscling wreckage of the opposing landscape.
This is not a natura morta
though in the composition
so far it might seem so.
No, it is the grounds of the terra firma
where you were conceived
on an Easter not so long ago.
Nine months later, your magi were made of snow.
Here, you milked at your mother's breasts
for a while, were weaned, lay on my lap
crying at midnight until I gently placed
a bottle into the pink pump of your mouth
and sang you a lullaby about longing or death.
A London air rock-a-bying over the rainbow
all in one summertime's breath
here in the heartland of Vilnius
miles and miles to go to where
my native tongue's birthplace rests.
I came by here only on a whim,
happening to be nearby on another mission.
But I took out my notebook and noted down
the sweet birch and apple tree outside the window
and the sour quince next to the walkway.
And I looked a long time
at the half-broken swing on the tiny playground.
It was daytime, and so I had to imagine
the moon glazing the glass of the bedroom,
glazing your overwhelmingly melancholy
and slaked mother with its chaste kiss.
I don't miss any of this, the whinchats, the symmetry,

nor the cramped one-room flat of your lifeblood's font,
but I do want to remember and consecrate
the tough give-and-take of the then flawless bliss.

The Partisan Like All Creatures Drops Dead As Chaste In Ignorance As The Morning Dew

to stagger
in the woods
like a deer
in the snow

not an arrow
in the throat
but a bullet

not knowing
whether to bleat
or weep
not knowing
how why when where
what
it was all about
when you started out

with God's blood
on your hands
and now your blood
in his

The Finest Artwork

The finest artwork on display in Vilnius
or maybe just the most interesting
is the work by the schoolchildren
in the hallway to the British Library
just below the prestigious private gallery
known as "the gate" to some, and "the goal" to others.
When I visit there, looking at all
the lilacs and purple and pink houses,
the smoke from brick chimneys
rising to greet the morning sun,
dead birds with splayed feet
in the air—sometimes wearing shoes—
thick-limbed trees with green fish in them,
the fish with apples or rowanberries for eyes,
or a fire-spitting dragon sharing the sky
with a moon the color of Noa Noa,
I often wonder why the up-and-coming artists
from the "the gate" or "the goal" don't go
down—it's only one flight—more often.
Maybe they are embarrassed because the children
paint the chaotic soul of earth and sky
with such relish and freedom of spirit,
and will give even without asking
a masterpiece to a stranger for free.
Maybe they are ashamed because the abstract terror
and the conceptual contortions of their lust for fame
or fortune or transcendence look so conceptually banal
—a grey mishmash of spotlights and afterimages—
after one has gazed directly at the sun of the children
and seen fish with people for eyes,
apple trees with azure fish for leaves,
or witnessed the miracle of a pitchforked-winged
angel hatching a pineapple, or maybe it's a grenade

or a painted Easter egg smiling at the camera
and saying sushi, Ignalina, Hiroshima, cheese.

Like Childe Harold Before Him

Patiently, he tumbled all their combinations
inside out—svelte, enchanting women, that is.
Smitten now with cataracts and catarrh
and a compulsively broken heart,
he lumbers through the cobblestone and terra-cotta
forest of Vilnius, eyeing the sleek granite statues
of postmodern women and goddesses as best he can,
and squinting through a pea soup of smog and skyline lights
at an inaccessible moon ringed in by a chastity belt of lurid stars.
Drifter, deserter from the vicious Empire, his own doppelganger,
vilified as a Peer Gynt spider, a lifetime has lapsed away
in what at present are truly burnt-out dugouts.
Now midnight's envoy, bivouacking in the hay of an AWOL past,
he hangs out under an archway with ulcerous cats and himself
in derivative, burlesque villas of Villon's imagination.
Look. A disembodied hand reaches out to paw or pick
another lock, and then stops short when his daemon
shoves a bottle of moonshine in his mouth.