

JOAN COLBY

Celtic Demons: The Dullahan

The black horse snorts,
Eyes of burning coals,
Hoofs striking sparks from
The tarred roads.
It's moonlight
Of course, when he rides, severed head
Tucked under the arm of his Greatcoat.
The swags of blood he
Throws from his iron bucket will
Condemn you. Look aside,
Sojourner. Hold up your cross of gold.

Celtic Demons: Balor

A single eye
To concentrate his purpose.
Wide, lidless, the pupil
Like a bullet slays by staring.
One giant leg like Long John Silver's
To leap the hedges where the living
Hide. Staring and stomping
Through the nightmares of children
Until they fall into the deeps
Of dreams where his water demons ride.

Celtic Demons: Kelpie

Ghost horse, its seaweed mane dripping
With saltwater, with the tears
Of the unbaptized. Beware
Of a steed captured so easily,
How it bends its head into the bridle,
How it canters metrically
To rock you into the sleep
Of the seas you enter, the dark
Waters you will breathe.

Celtic Demons: Leanan Sidhe

Muse of poets and singers,
Harpists and rhymers,
Where does it come from,
The vision and the notion.
She smiles as you lift pen
Or bow, as the ink or the
Music unfolds its calligraphy.
How you wait for her shadow
To beautify your expectancy.
She paints her face with the blood
Of your efforts and strides the avenues
Seeking new talent.

Celtic Demons: Sluagh

Here come the dead sinners
In a murmuration of starlings,
Their wings darkening the western skies.
They nest in the hearts of those who remember,
In the guilt house of the survivor.
Shut the windows where the dying lie
Reciting their final contritions.
Unabsolved, the sluagh open their beaks
To swallow the escaping spirits.

Celtic Demons: The Banshee

Hag in a fog-drenched robe
Or a beautiful redhead, her hood
Thrown back, her fire eyes blazing.
Keening a prophecy of the
Soon-to-be-dead. In the sod hut they stare
At each other wondering.

Each Irish family owned one.
They crept on the coffin ships
Wrapped in shawls of woe.
The old tales slipped from the grandmothers' tongues
And were forgotten.

On winter nights, I hear that
Keening. There are strange tracks in the snow.
The hunger moon is overhead.
I thought it must be coyotes.
Even so.

Blood Moon

First the shadow, its knife blade slicing
The full loaf until it is obliterated
As if devoured hot from the oven
Of desire. Then the red halo
Of martyred saints. See the shroud
Of crimson wrap its face
With the blood of ages. All this
Obscured tonight by the clouds
That carried a late snow into the ides
Of April, an unforgiving forecast
As Passover begins its ritual suppers,
As Easter hauls its cargo of lilies
Over the horizon. We have missed
The total eclipse that won't come again
Until 2019. Five years once seemed
Like nothing. Now we know how statistics
Can carve us into that holy bread
Swallowed whole.

Composing the Essay

The first rule is to narrow the topic
So love becomes unspeakable
As voices buzzing
At the hives of god.

Parse the big sentences
Of justice or mercy
Into soulless abstractions.

Fondle one small creature,
The ferret of imagination
Or the snowy owl of changing weathers

And you will learn that
When the heart fails
Everything fails.

Homeward

Grey mist sleeves the unfrocked trees.
A season that perpetrates the myth
Of goodwill. An agnostic sky
Low-lidded, obdurate, disenfranchised.

The beavers' exhalations rise
Through the lodge's vent like smoke
Issuing from a chimney to testify
Of life within.

The chickadees' brain cells are replaced
Annually. All expectations
Must be novel. A new world
Of seed, nest and song.

Take the measure of the stars.
A comet dies into the sun
The way a woman slips into the arms
Of an assassin. Knave of love.

Darkness falls early. Farther north
The aurora borealis paints the night
With fluorescence. This is how we learn
To live without the light

Of benevolence. A wolf's howl
Crosses the ice. Mushers forsake indifference,
Pick up the pace
Lashing the teams homeward.

Joan Colby's 14th book of poetry, *The Wingback Chair*, will be published by FutureCycle Press this fall. A chapbook, *Bittersweet*, is just out from Main Street Rag Press. One of her poems is a winner of the 2014 *Atlanta Review* International Poetry Contest. She is associate editor of both the *Kentucky Review* and *FutureCycle* Press.