

III. The Gates



Dying Gaul, Roman marble copy of a lost bronze Greek sculpture, c. 220 B.C.E., Hellenistic Period, Capitoline Museum, Rome.

Illness is the night-side of life...
Susan Sontag (p.3)

I have to massage my right breast for at least 5 minutes a day.
But 5 minutes is a lot...
Think of it as a meditative act!

Apprentice Boys of Derry: *One of the Protestant loyal orders set up to commemorate the Siege of Derry and named after the apprentices who closed the city gates against the besieging forces. The Apprentice Boys hold two main marches in Derry every year, in August and December. Adrian Kerr (Glossary)*

How do I do that?

The view of cancer as a disease of the failure of expressiveness condemns the cancer patient.
S. S. (p.49)

My thoughts slip into the past.

B Specials/Ulster Special Constabulary (USC): *The USC were a 100 per cent unionist police reserve force set up after partition. The A and C Specials were soon disbanded, but the part-time B Specials, a notoriously sectarian force, was not disbanded until 1970,*

when it was replaced by the equally sectarian Ulster Defence Regiment under the command of the British Army.

A. K. (Glossary)

A massive sense of guilt comes over me. Towards myself, towards what I caused myself, towards something that tastes like a wilful castration of motherhood and its iconic gesture, breastfeeding.

Nothing is more punitive than to give a disease a meaning – that meaning being invariably a moralistic one.

S. S. (p.59)

Fortunately this mutilation is only partial.

The difference between sanatoria (that is, exile) and surgery (that is, crematoria).

S. S. (p.83)

CS Gas: *Form of tear gas used by the RUC and British Army in the North during riots in the late 1960s and early 1970s.*

A. K. (Glossary)

Then I look at the other breast, which now looks so strange, so absurd.

So, do I have to massage this one, too?

Dáil/ Dáil Éireann: *Parliament of the Republic of Ireland.*

A. K. (Glossary)

Actually it seems like it needs it.

Compared to the right one, it seems almost emptied out; even though it's the real one.

Democratic Unionist Party (DUP): *Hardline unionist political party formed by Ian Paisley in 1971. Currently the largest unionist party in the North.*

A. K. (Glossary)

Before, it was the part of me that I loved the most; or, the only part that I had always accepted.

I was almost proud of it.

Internment: *Imprisonment without charge or trial, used against nationalists and republicans by the Stormont Government in every decade of its existence from the 1920s to the 1970s.*

A. K. (Glossary)

So?

You got yourself a disease that took away your only pride?

Evoking a manic-depressive character type almost the opposite of that forlorn, self-hating, emotionally inert creature, the contemporary cancer personality.

S. S. (p.54)

Maybe this way you're forced to appreciate the rest.
The rest. A body that has never felt part of me.

Patients who are instructed that they have, unwittingly, caused their disease are also being made to feel that they deserved it.
S. S. (p.56)

Now the only part in which I have almost no sensitivity is that one, the right breast, especially the area around the armpit and under the arm, where the drainage was, where they took out the famous Sentinel Lymph Node.
What an absurd name. What a beautiful name. That Sentinel was healthy.

Irish Republican Army (IRA): *Irish republican military organisation set up to fight against British rule in Ireland. The name was first used in Ireland during the 1916 rising (although it had previously been used during a brief skirmish on the American-Canadian border in 1866). The IRA split in 1969 (see below).*
A. K. (Glossary)

Here's another sense of guilt. Towards all the women that didn't save the all-important lymph of their arms.

Loyalists: *General term used for those who wish to retain the constitutional link with Britain and are prepared to resort to violent means to do so. Mainly Protestant.*
A. K. (Glossary)

Can I be the only one? The only one to have her arm safe and sound? To have her life completely sound, without even one hormone treatment through her mouth?

Nationalists: *General term used for those who wish to re-unite Ireland using constitutional (non-violent) methods. Mainly Catholic.*
A. K. (Glossary)

Sometimes I wake up with a start.
The anxiety that comes, comes from afar. It's the sum of all my anxieties, of an entire life. Then, luckily, I remember the anxiety of death, and I calm down. That, I no longer have. It's gone. For this reason I believe I will never again suffer from panic attacks. As I feel them arriving, I dominate them, like puppies.

Northern Ireland Civil Right Association (NICRA): *Formed in January 1967, the Northern Ireland Civil Right Association (NICRA) 'evolved from a diverse set of political aims and ideals which slowly came together to forge a unity based on a common frustration with unionism, a broad rejection of crude nationalism and a growing awareness of the need for an effective vehicle for political and legislative reform'.*
Despite the organisation's origins, in a proposal forwarded by the Wolfe Tone Society, and later unionist accusations that NICRA was merely a front for active republicanism, the organisation was never republican, and for fourteen original NICRA committee members, only four were members of republican organisations.
From 1967 to 1972, NICRA engaged in a programme of street demonstrations and civil disobedience demanding universal adult suffrage in all elections, an end to gerrymandering, allocation of housing on the basis of need, repeal of the Special Power Act and the disbandment of the B Specials, the ending of discrimination in employment

and, later, the ending of internment. NICRA's use of street protests as a tactic virtually ended after thirteen people were shot dead and a further eighteen injured on a NICRA-organised anti-internment march in Derry on 30 January 1972, Bloody Sunday.

A. K. (Glossary)

And yet the jolt that awakes me is still there.

Sometimes it arrives because I'm suddenly aware of the loss, because of the the nostalgia for myself, for how I was.

Could it be that I liked myself so much?

Official Irish Republican Army (OIRA): *Formed after the IRA split in 1969, the OIRA was comprised of those who supported former IRA leader Cathal Goulding's attempts to steer the IRA towards a more left-wing political path and end abstentionism (refusal to take seats in London, Dublin or Belfast parliaments, or local councils, if elected). The OIRA declared a ceasefire in 1972.*

A. K. (Glossary)

Don't be ridiculous, you detested yourself!

That's an idea you have of yourself that goes back much further, to before it all happened, to when you were 22, or, even further, to your happy childhood, before the age of 9.

Paras (Parachute Regiment): *Elite parachute regiment of the British Army responsible for many deaths during the conflict in the North, including the Ballymurphy Massacre in Belfast and Bloody Sunday in Derry.*

A. K. (Glossary)

Someone told me recently that those who live through painful childhoods are better at surviving setbacks, in the end; and those who have happy childhoods less so.

Provisional Irish Republican Army (PIRA): *Formed after the IRA split in 1969, the PIRA was comprised of those who opposed the attempts to steer the IRA towards a more political path, believing that military tactics were still necessary. The PIRA was the largest republican paramilitary organisation in the North throughout the conflict.*

A. K. (Glossary)

I'm sometimes proud to see how often I've got back up.

Republicans: *General term used for those who wish to re-unite Ireland and are prepared to use military methods. Mainly Catholic.*

A. K. (Glossary)

Even though I'm so tired, even though this time it seems to take me longer, even though it seems like I'm fighting half-heartedly.

I feel like I'm in the same position as the *Dying Gaul* (although he is dying)... still on the ground, about to get up again, but putting a little too much effort into it.

And I always feel that pectoral muscle too much when I push...

Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC): *Police force in the North of Ireland, set up after partition and regarded by most nationalists and republicans as being a partisan unionist force. Renamed as the Police Service of Northern Ireland in 2001.*

A. K. (Glossary)

At other times, though, the jolt is from the sense of guilt towards all the other sick women that I would like to embrace, but I can't because, well, I feel guilty. How can I say to them that I escaped two of the most frightening things?
And yet on my side I have age and amputation.
It doesn't seem to be enough.

Sinn Féin: *Political wing of the IRA; its split in 1970 mirrored that of the IRA in 1969. The wing linked to the PIRA launched its political strategy in the aftermath of the hunger strikes in 1981 and is now the largest nationalist/republican party in the North. The wing attached to the OIRA eventually became The Workers' Party.*

A. K. (Glossary)

Are we sure I did the right thing?
But am I the only case in the world?
Or did I convince myself that I shouldn't take those pills? For 5 years?

It is impossible to avoid damaging or destroying healthy cells (indeed, some methods used to treat cancer can cause cancer), but it is thought that nearly any damage to the body is justified if it save the patient's life.

S. S. (p.67)

Last August, those 5 years seemed long, endless. And yet I scolded myself for not thanking my good fortune; I scolded myself, thinking about my various hospital roommates.

Special Power Acts: *Draconian legislation enacted by the Stormont Government in 1922 giving it extensive powers of repression.*

A. K. (Glossary)

The very idea made suicide seem like the only real option.
And who committed suicide? The one closest to me, in that same long, long August.
He understood my psychic danger, because he was in it up to his neck.

Stormont Government: *Term used to describe the one-party Unionist government parliament at Stormont in Belfast.*

A. K. (Glossary)

Why, though, did I not have any inkling of his loneliness, his depression? Why did I let him?

Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF): *Unionist/loyalist paramilitary organisation. Named after the organisation formed to fight Home Rule in 1912, it re-emerged in 1966 around the period of the fiftieth anniversary of the 1916 rising and remained active throughout the conflict.*

A. K. (Glossary)

I was caught up in the selfishness of a genuine love that instead was sucking away my life.

Ulster Unionist Party: *Unionist political party that formed the government in the North from partition until 1972. Remained the largest unionist party in the North until it was overtaken by the DUP in the early part of the twenty-first century.*

A. K. (Glossary)

A devil of different forms. It seems like I've passed through purgatory and hell in the last three years, and there are still some hiccups. The beauty of it is that nothing surprises me any more.

Unionists: *General term used for those who wish to retain the constitutional link with Britain using non-violent methods. Mainly Protestant.*

A. K. (Glossary)

They seem like all the various aspects of my past that constantly tap at my back. A disease and an infinite death. A need for love that screams from deep inside but will never have the courage to reveal itself. As soon as it reveals itself it will fall into false loves, which are everywhere. So it's better to take refuge, wrap myself up in the unconscious where I speak to myself from another world, magic and mysterious. The oneiric world that saved me.

'Consumption in the commencement is easy to cure, and difficult to understand; but when it has neither been discovered in due time, nor treated upon a proper principle, it becomes easy to understand, and difficult to cure.'

Machiavelli (S. S., p.77)

And yet I'm still sure they're coincidences...

Dreaming of something so similar to reality; unconsciously hearing your own body speak... Or, poor thing, who knows how long it was screaming for attention... and behold, body and soul interacted with each other, without my noticing, and pushed me to go through hell, to save myself.

I'm safe, yes.

References:

Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor & Aids and its Metaphors*, Penguin Classics, London 2002 [1991].

Adrian Kerr, *Free Derry. Protest and Resistance*, Guildhall Press, Derry 2013.