

Eat or We Both Starve

by Victoria Kennefick



Victoria Kennefick is a poet, writer and teacher from Shanagarry, Co. Cork now based in Co. Kerry. Her pamphlet, *White Whale* (Southword Editions, 2015), won the Munster Literature Centre Fool for Poetry Chapbook Competition and the Saboteur Award for Best Poetry Pamphlet. Her work has appeared in *Poetry*, *The Poetry Review*, *PN Review*, *Poetry Ireland Review*, *The Stinging Fly*, *Poetry News*, *Prelude*, *Copper Nickel*, *The Irish Times*, *Ambit*, *bath magg*, *Banshee* and elsewhere. She won the 2013 Red Line Book Festival Poetry Prize and many of her poems have also been anthologised and broadcast on national radio stations. A recipient of a Next Generation Artist Award from the Arts Council of Ireland, she has received bursaries from Kerry County Council and Words Ireland. She is a co-host of the Unlaunched Books Podcast and is on the committee of Listowel Writers' Week, Ireland's longest-running literary festival. Victoria holds a doctorate in English from University College Cork and studied at Emory University and Georgia College and State University as part of a Fulbright Scholarship. Her research on the short stories of Flannery O'Connor and Frank O'Connor was also funded by an IRCHSS Scholarship and a MARBL Fellowship.

Reviews

'Victoria Kennefick writes with a fresh urgency, giving us poems that are honest and fearless. She once said: "Poetry has saved my life, made my life. Reading and writing it have taught me bravery and discipline." Kennefick is unafraid to explore bereavement, sex and the female body in her poetry. She writes with a visceral originality. Her poems are rich with physical sensations. She is able to find beauty in the big subjects like sorrow and desire, offering us the finest, most startling details. Her identity as a young Irish woman is hugely important to her, something she explores with intelligence and candour. I have always felt there is nothing Victoria could not tackle. The scope in her work is exhilarating.' - Rebecca Goss

Complex, challenging, and deeply-felt, *Eat or We Both Starve* is a tour-de-force. Though some of Kennefick's subjects are frequently explored in poetry – grief, loss of innocence, self-worth – her poems draw on a palette that feels entirely new. In her work, the body itself is not a safe space: digestion, hunger and any physical needs become dangerous. In “Anaemia”, hunger creates “My head / a barking dog; rabid, it drools.” Imagery of food and hunger pervades the collection, including a series of poems depicting the hunger strikes of saints, and ending with the author's own “hunger strike”, as well as poems about the allure and danger of meat, the mother's body as a site of cannibalism, and the ways in which a woman's body is seen by the Catholic church. Though this collection is so visceral that it at times becomes difficult to read, Kennefick writes with great care and imagination: the craft and consideration given to each poem is obvious, and the themes never feel overwrought or bathetic. This is a delicate balancing act, especially when looking at the female body as a site of so much emotion and so much trauma, as in “January,” where, “Emptying myself / of all things ripe / and wanton, I am winter grass” or “Alternative Medicine”, in which the narrator describes confessing “that food squirms as if alive with maggots, / that I have shut my mouth to everything but words.” - Rosamund, Good Reads

Swimming Lesson

the day I almost drowned
mother pulled me out
of the ocean by my hair

the world blurry with seawater
air wet and my lips blue without
I was not sure

I was alive – my eight-year-old
chest tight and sore
it surprised me

how quick
the surrender
underwater

I could see myself
a baby in a bubble
ultrasound

the bubble simmered
a tiny heart pulsed
in and out like a wave

it didn't count
that sun once baked my skin

to contentment

that I liked cats or yellow jumpers
stitches prepared
to unravel

start again – I resurfaced on sand
little sister knelt beside me
father called my name

wanting to die
salty droplets
trembled on my skin

Selfie

Sitting alone in the house eating
my fingernails/watching the sky
move away. The room is full/versions of me
crouching on the floor/balancing on the windowsill/
reclining on the pout of my lower lip/
asleep in the crease of my eyelid.
Not alone/with myself/A snare /I have been
running from I do not live
the way humans are supposed to,
compare my face to others you know.
I fall short/an embarrassing fringe/No matter
what face I try on it's exhausting.
All versions shake our heads.
There is much to do/until we think we are not
What We Are: Victoria(s). I see
those letters written on envelopes I know
are for me because of the shape
of that word/that greedy V –
its two arms open wide/ready
to accept anything.

Diet

In the hospital, my father ate tubs of high-calorie
strawberry-flavoured meal-replacement.
Occasionally, vanilla. Sometimes, they brought
meals under plastic covers with stewed tea.
The whole ward a nightmare of hard-boiled eggs
and jelly. He would have starved
were we not on-call to lift up his head in our hands,
talk nonsense, distract him from the truth

of how he was living. With his eyes shut, he opened
his mouth a little, so we fed him with tiny spoons.
How could he eat it, this gloopy mass,
sliming the carton? In truth, I fell out of love with food
because my father did. It was summer, I remember.
I wanted to pick life from trees, wellness from bushes,
huge bunches of health from the garden and hold them
to his lips so he could taste sun, air, light, his life
still throbbing in my veins. But everything died
when I brought it inside that room. Still
I marvel how death turned me too to bone

Discussion Ideas

- What do you think of the sparsity of 'Swimming Lesson' on the page – the short lines, white space, lack of punctuation and capital letters? Is it a fitting form for the subject of the poem?
- What is being learned, other than how to swim, in this poem?
- Are you – or your friends or relations – selfie-takers? Do you recognise pressures explored in the poem 'Selfie'?
- What's the relationship between the selfies and the envelopes in the poem?
- What does that one word title mean to you, 'Diet'? Is it a powerful or a neutral word to you? What about to the speaker of the poem?

Other books by Victoria Kennefick

White Whale (Southword Editions, 2015)

If you liked Victoria Kennefick, try ...

- Tiffany Atkinson
- Gail McConnell
- Warsan Shire

Victoria Kennefick online

www.victoriakennefick.com