

2000

# Icon

Margaret Gibson

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## ICON

*Thou still unravished*—but we would  
cut the cedar clear through  
*bride and brede*, and so with a chain saw's rude  
disquiet we notched in a wedge and made to lay the tree  
down where we wanted it,  
watching a damson spew of dust  
spun from the heartwood's slowly exposed,  
unlikely burgundy.

How cleanly then the sixty years  
of cedar cracked and fell  
away—and gave us the wider view of the pond  
we'd wanted. A heron hunched its neck and labored  
from the reeds. And then there was quiet.  
My job was to limb its long antlered branches,  
unruly evergreen, for kindling—too preoccupied to think  
to bless it.

As is his custom, my husband  
worked without swerving  
from the task at hand, whistling, I swear it,  
*in full-throated ease*. Listening, I was already serving  
a distant master,  
drawn into dream by the wedge of heartwood  
we'd propped by the stone wall, its potent core  
of muscadine a magnet.

That quiet well, that purple flare  
set me summoning  
birdsong buried deep in trees, all the unheard  
stir and flutter inherent there in the early color  
of sunrise  
claret mornings before the rain comes on—  
a blaze of song, a murmurous haunt of song, then  
the ache of it. Pent there.

That's the thing of it, the pivot.  
A wedge of wood, the quiet  
eye's configuring, unacknowledged pain—  
and I turned abruptly inward, having just glimpsed  
an icon of you, John Keats,  
a sketch Rublev might have made one sultry afternoon  
in Rome as you lay wasted and spent  
on your deathbed,

its pillow and shadow a chrismal nest  
about your fevered head,  
the diffuse gist of you gathered in what must be  
sensed as presence—Oh, but not unravished—  
yours such a fervent, fraught  
ambition I think of the young man I saw  
before Orain's altar on Iona. He was already kneeling  
when I happened in,

mute before the altar's wide board  
and plain brass cross,  
all his ardent plans unscrolled, placed boldly  
there, given into the burden of the mystery  
we hope to illumine.  
He touched his forehead to the board,  
still kneeling, and for all I know blushed crimson,  
caught at such fervor.

I tried to ignore him, I looked  
away into the cul de sac  
and mudra my hands were making of emptiness.  
Theophane the Recluse was right—most of us  
are like shavings of wood  
curled round the rudely opened core  
we pretend not to notice, catching at musky  
shadows instead.

But I couldn't ignore him—no,  
we endured

each other's presence as one turns up a collar  
against an intruding wind off the Sound and keeps on  
keeping on; we were kneeling  
but not impossibly. The wine of unease  
and dissonance also a communion—  
or it could be.

In the argent revelry and dark  
harmonies of your poems  
you seized at that truth, you bruised your way  
into leafy passages, into the ordinary  
understory, searching  
what only can be known by touch and blunder,  
or sensed in blurred discernings, in presage,  
solitude and wonder.

In orchard joy, in the tease of sorrow  
you compelled  
response. Like you, but not yet betrayed  
by the unimagined, the youth in Orain's chapel stood,  
scrolled up his papers  
from the altar's wood, straightened his watch cap  
and—nodding off to the side, where I wasn't quite—  
he strode away.

And then I stood where he'd stood  
full of blood and promise.  
And where you'd stood, coughing in the raw wind  
perhaps, bareheaded, a pilgrim. Stood there in the ringing  
quiet without  
the comfort of word or gesture or vow,  
sensing, within the silence, a harvest—for that  
is our labor, *touch wood*.