



Kitty Fitzgerald

Kitty Fitzgerald is the author of four novels: *Pigtopia* (Faber, 2005), *Small Acts of Treachery* (Brandon, 2002), *Snapdragons* (Brandon, 1999) and *Marge* (Sheba, 1985); a poetry collection: *For Crying Out Loud* (IRON Press, 1994) with Valerie Laws; and four plays for the BBC and eight theatre plays. She was a finalist (second place) in the Barnes & Noble Discover Great New Writers Award in 2005; received a Hawthornden Fellowship in 2005, a Time to Write Award in 2003, and a C.P. Taylor Playwriting Bursary; and won most original screenplay for the film *Dream On* at Le Baule Film Festival. Born in Ireland, she lives on Tyneside.

The Herb Gardener Talks of Basil

She calls it the corpse plant
with its cloven flowers
and cloying sweetness.

I sprinkle it on floors
to discourage flies
and still the mind.

She says it only grows
on the wings of a curse,
whispered as it's sown
in fresh turned earth.

I cure stomach aches
and monthly cramps
with its infusion.

She says it will not flourish
in this northern land,
where frost is intolerant
to its need of warmth.

I have built glass shelters here
where the sun can rest for

more than half a day, new shoots
are pushing through.

She's suspicious of my herb seeds,
brought on galleys up the estuary,
from Rome, to this outcrop.

I offer her bay leaves for luck;

imagine her unclothed
between lavender-scented sheets,
her coarse skin soothed
with oil of olives,

resin of sweet juniper
burning on a charcoal coil.

She drops the plant at my feet,
strides away before
our hands can meet,
towards her ragged hills
which rise like waves
towards the sky.

On Ravenglass

The soil is layered deep with dusty remnants of the Bathhouse. Viridian glass, fragments of red jasper, horn, enamel, are pressed between the delicate bones of small, long-dead creatures.

In Spring, the scent of Thyme seeps through veined earth, lingers on the salted wind, blows across a sea which carries still, threats and promises from the Celtic heartland.

Knowing

We know the wind on the sea
and what it tells
we know soil, silt, sand,
the singing spells
of shape-shifters.

When the hen crowed like a cock
and dog lay down with cat
we knew these omens of ill-luck.

Next sunrise, the Eagle flag
rose over the hill,
horses and foot soldiers
set up camp, plundered
ash and elder for their fires.

We mixed pigments,
painted our skin battle-blue,
twined beads and feathers
into our hair, chanted
till the full fall of night:

*thought is swifter than wind
truth is clearer than water*

Building a Roman Wall in the North Lands

Select your route with adequate care,
be aware of Celt and Pictish trails,
their fondness for attacks through bracken,
plan it straight as the eagle flies,
remove plants, trees, grass,
do not dwell on thoughts of home
or your wife's swelling belly.
Dig trenches deep enough
to hide a sleeping hound
and wide enough to march
men close, yet ten abreast,
forget the years you will not witness
pass across your daughter's face.
Line the dug out ground with
smallish stones, up to the height
of your baby's knee, cover to the rim
with grit and gravel, pressed and stamped
to firmness, to withstand the bitter frosts,
the cold which penetrates your veins.
Curve the surface of the road
sufficiently, so rain can drain into
the ditches on each side, move on,
until you reach the fringe of Pictland,
slake your thirst with red grape wine
infused with Rosemary and Thyme.
Build a wall.

Extracts from a Herbalist's Notebook

*For tired labourers an infusion
to lift the spirits:*

place one ounce of Borage in a
pre-warmed earthstone bowl,
with one half ounce of Rue,
its leaves still bluish-green.
Stir in good measures of
warm water, upwards of one pint,
leave overnight, covered with muslin,
until the cloth is stained emerald
and tangy with the scent of cucumber.
Strain at dawn, through fresh honeycomb,
with the moon still in the sky.
Sip throughout the day, till the sun dips
and acrobating swallows twirl
above the creeping tide.

*For soldiers returning injured after battle:
a concoction to discourage bruising:*

pulp the fresh seeds of Caraway
until powdery as new fallen snow,
mix with water heated by the sun,
make into a paste, spread thickly
on the wounds while warm,
cover with strips of woven cloth,
soaked well in Marigold,
till the sharpness stings the skin
and the blood is cooled.

For galley crews in need of rest:

place bunches of just-picked Bay into a steaming bath,
crushing the pungent glands along its leaves
with nutmegs to release the oily scent.
Add saffron stigmas, up to three,
have them soak and breathe
the vapours for one hour.
After, burn dried Lavender to aid
a night and day long sleep.

For children suffering pinching stomach pains:

at sunrise, infuse one full hand of the flowers and
leaves of Coriander, with two sprigs of sweetest Basil,
add in three clusters of Valerian from loamy soil.
Steep through the passage
of one whole day, whispering
the child's name every hour.
Strain the following dusk, through fine linen,
add one leaf of Mint and four peppercorns,
dose liberally until the ache subsides.

