

Kenelm Preaching

Judith O'Neill

We straggled in at six under the trees
And sat up high, level with leafy boughs,
To hear you speak. Sunlight flooded the glass
And dazed our eyes. Your voice, so faint at first,
So thin, we had to lean to catch the words.
'I will not keep you long,' you said—but did.

You smiled and gathered strength. Others might take
One text as quite enough for one night's work
But you took three. Each in its turn you peeled,
Discarding the husk, probing the heart to find
A kernel tough and round. You fingered them,
Strange yet familiar in your careful hands.

The restless children kicked their chairs. Birds sang.
A coin rolled slowly down the centre aisle.
The cat you loved strolled in, and we,
Lost to all sense of time, began to see
The world the way you saw it, sharp and clear.
'I've kept you long enough,' you said—and stopped.

At seven you read the notices. You told
The feasts that waited for us and we watched
To guess which saint would catch your eye and lead
You off into another age as close to you
As yesterday. We saw a life unfurled,
The colours hardly faded with the years.

Your voice took fire. You gave us then a taste
Of what you'd say on Wednesday—manna enough
To tide us over any wilderness.
Your blessing sent the children scuttling out
And down the stairs, eager to hurry home,
As, tired now, you folded up your robes.