

Classic Poetry Series

C S Lewis

- poems -

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After Prayers, Lie Cold

Arise my body, my small body, we have striven
Enough, and He is merciful; we are forgiven.
Arise small body, puppet-like and pale, and go,
White as the bed-clothes into bed, and cold as snow,
Undress with small, cold fingers and put out the light,
And be alone, hush'd mortal, in the sacred night,
-A meadow whipt flat with the rain, a cup
Emptied and clean, a garment washed and folded up,
Faded in colour, thinned almost to raggedness
By dirt and by the washing of that dirtiness.
Be not too quickly warm again. Lie cold; consent
To weariness' and pardon's watery element.
Drink up the bitter water, breathe the chilly death;
Soon enough comes the riot of our blood and breath.

C S Lewis

An Expostulation

Against too many writers of science fiction

Why did you lure us on like this,
Light-year on light-year, through the abyss,
Building (as though we cared for size!)
Empires that cover galaxies
If at the journey's end we find
The same old stuff we left behind,
Well-worn Tellurian stories of
Crooks, spies, conspirators, or love,
Whose setting might as well have been
The Bronx, Montmartre, or Bedinal Green?

Why should I leave this green-floored cell,
Roofed with blue air, in which we dwell,
Unless, outside its guarded gates,
Long, long desired, the Unearthly waits
Strangeness that moves us more than fear,
Beauty that stabs with tingling spear,
Or Wonder, laying on one's heart
That finger-tip at which we start
As if some thought too swift and shy
For reason's grasp had just gone by?

C S Lewis

As the Ruin Falls

All this is flashy rhetoric about loving you.
I never had a selfless thought since I was born.
I am mercenary and self-seeking through and through:
I want God, you, all friends, merely to serve my turn.

Peace, re-assurance, pleasure, are the goals I seek,
I cannot crawl one inch outside my proper skin:
I talk of love --a scholar's parrot may talk Greek--
But, self-imprisoned, always end where I begin.

Only that now you have taught me (but how late) my lack.
I see the chasm. And everything you are was making
My heart into a bridge by which I might get back
From exile, and grow man. And now the bridge is breaking.

For this I bless you as the ruin falls. The pains
You give me are more precious than all other gains.

C S Lewis

Cliche Came Out of its Cage

1

You said 'The world is going back to Paganism'.
Oh bright Vision! I saw our dynasty in the bar of the House
Spill from their tumblers a libation to the Erinyes,
And Leavis with Lord Russell wreathed in flowers, heralded with flutes,
Leading white bulls to the cathedral of the solemn Muses
To pay where due the glory of their latest theorem.
Hestia's fire in every flat, rekindled, burned before
The Lardergods. Unmarried daughters with obedient hands
Tended it By the hearth the white-armd venerable mother
Domum servabat, lanam faciebat. at the hour
Of sacrifice their brothers came, silent, corrected, grave
Before their elders; on their downy cheeks easily the blush
Arose (it is the mark of freemen's children) as they trooped,
Gleaming with oil, demurely home from the palaestra or the dance.
Walk carefully, do not wake the envy of the happy gods,
Shun Hubris. The middle of the road, the middle sort of men,
Are best. Aidos surpasses gold. Reverence for the aged
Is wholesome as seasonable rain, and for a man to die
Defending the city in battle is a harmonious thing.
Thus with magistral hand the Puritan Sophrosune
Cooled and schooled and tempered our uneasy motions;
Heathendom came again, the circumspection and the holy fears ...
You said it. Did you mean it? Oh inordinate liar, stop.

2

Or did you mean another kind of heathenry?
Think, then, that under heaven-roof the little disc of the earth,
Fortified Midgard, lies encircled by the ravening Worm.
Over its icy bastions faces of giant and troll
Look in, ready to invade it. The Wolf, admittedly, is bound;
But the bond wil1 break, the Beast run free. The weary gods,
Scarred with old wounds the one-eyed Odin, Tyr who has lost a hand,
Will limp to their stations for the Last defence. Make it your hope
To be counted worthy on that day to stand beside them;
For the end of man is to partake of their defeat and die
His second, final death in good company. The stupid, strong
Uteachable monsters are certain to be victorious at last,
And every man of decent blood is on the losing side.
Take as your model the tall women with yellow hair in plaits
Who walked back into burning houses to die with men,
Or him who as the death spear entered into his vitals
Made critical comments on its workmanship and aim.
Are these the Pagans you spoke of? Know your betters and crouch, dogs;
You that have Vichy water in your veins and worship the event
Your goddess History (whom your fathers called the strumpet Fortune).

C S Lewis

Evolutionary Hymn

Lead us, Evolution, lead us
Up the future's endless stair;
Chop us, change us, prod us, weed us.
For stagnation is despair:
Groping, guessing, yet progressing,
Lead us nobody knows where.

Wrong or justice, joy or sorrow,
In the present what are they
while there's always jam-tomorrow,
While we tread the onward way?
Never knowing where we're going,
We can never go astray.

To whatever variation
Our posterity may turn
Hairy, squashy, or crustacean,
Bulbous-eyed or square of stern,
Tusked or toothless, mild or ruthless,
Towards that unknown god we yearn.

Ask not if it's god or devil,
Brethren, lest your words imply
Static norms of good and evil
(As in Plato) throned on high;
Such scholastic, inelastic,
Abstract yardsticks we deny.

Far too long have sages vainly
Glossed great Nature's simple text;
He who runs can read it plainly,
'Goodness = what comes next.'
By evolving, Life is solving
All the questions we perplexed.

Oh then! Value means survival-
Value. If our progeny
Spreads and spawns and licks each rival,
That will prove its deity
(Far from pleasant, by our present,
Standards, though it may well be).

C S Lewis

On a Vulgar Error

No. It's an impudent falsehood. Men did not
Invariably think the newer way Prosaic
mad, inelegant, or what not.

Was the first pointed arch esteemed a blot
Upon the church? Did anybody say How
modern and how ugly? They did not.

Plate-armour, or windows glazed, or verse fire-hot
With rhymes from France, or spices from Cathay,
Were these at first a horror? They were not.

If, then, our present arts, laws, houses, food
All set us hankering after yesterday,
Need this be only an archaising mood?

Why, any man whose purse has been let blood
By sharpers, when he finds all drained away
Must compare how he stands with how he stood.

If a quack doctor's breezy ineptitude
Has cost me a leg, must I forget straightway
All that I can't do now, all that I could?

So, when our guides unanimously decry
The backward glance, I think we can guess why.

C S Lewis

On Being Human

Angelic minds, they say, by simple intelligence
Behold the Forms of nature. They discern
Unerringly the Archtypes, all the verities
Which mortals lack or indirectly learn.
Transparent in primordial truth, unvarying,
Pure Earthness and right Stonehood from their clear,
High eminence are seen; unveiled, the seminal
Huge Principles appear.

The Tree-ness of the tree they know-the meaning of
Arboreal life, how from earth's salty lap
The solar beam uplifts it; all the holiness
Enacted by leaves' fall and rising sap;

But never an angel knows the knife-edged severance
Of sun from shadow where the trees begin,
The blessed cool at every pore caressing us
-An angel has no skin.

They see the Form of Air; but mortals breathing it
Drink the whole summer down into the breast.
The lavish pinks, the field new-mown, the ravishing
Sea-smells, the wood-fire smoke that whispers Rest.
The tremor on the rippled pool of memory
That from each smell in widening circles goes,
The pleasure and the pang --can angels measure it?
An angel has no nose.

The nourishing of life, and how it flourishes
On death, and why, they utterly know; but not
The hill-born, earthy spring, the dark cold bilberries.
The ripe peach from the southern wall still hot
Full-bellied tankards foamy-topped, the delicate
Half-lyric lamb, a new loaf's billowy curves,
Nor porridge, nor the tingling taste of oranges.
-An angel has no nerves.

Far richer they! I know the senses' witchery
Guards us like air, from heavens too big to see;
Imminent death to man that barb'd sublimity
And dazzling edge of beauty unsheathed would be.
Yet here, within this tiny, charmed interior,
This parlour of the brain, their Maker shares
With living men some secrets in a privacy
Forever ours, not theirs.

C S Lewis

Prelude to Space

An Epithalium

So Man, grown vigorous now,
Holds himself ripe to breed,
Daily devises how
To ejaculate his seed
And boldly fertilize

The black womb of the unconsenting skies.

Some now alive expect
(I am told) to see the large,
Steel member grow erect,
Turgid with the fierce charge
Of our whole planet's skill,
Courage, wealth, knowledge, concentrated will,

Straining with lust to stamp
Our likeness on the abyss-
Bombs, gallows, Belsen camp,
Pox, polio, Thais' kiss
Or Judas, Moloch's fires
And Torquemada's (sons resemble sires).

Shall we, when the grim shape
Roars upward, dance and sing?
Yes: if we honour rape,
If we take pride to Ring
So bountifully on space
The sperm of our long woes, our large disgrace.

C S Lewis

Re-adjustment

I thought there would be a grave beauty, a sunset splendour
In being the last of one's kind: a topmost moment as one watched
The huge wave curving over Atlantis, the shrouded barge
Turning away with wounded Arthur, or Ilium burning.
Now I see that, all along, I was assuming a posterity
Of gentle hearts: someone, however distant in the depths of time,
Who could pick up our signal, who could understand a story. There won't be.

Between the new Hembidae and us who are dying, already
There rises a barrier across which no voice can ever carry,
For devils are unmaking language. We must let that alone forever.
Uproot your loves, one by one, with care, from the future,
And trusting to no future, receive the massive thrust
And surge of the many-dimensional timeless rays converging
On this small, significant dew drop, the present that mirrors all.

C S Lewis

Science-fiction Cradlesong

By and by Man will try
To get out into the sky,
Sailing far beyond the air
From Down and Here to Up and There.
Stars and sky, sky and stars
Make us feel the prison bars.

Suppose it done. Now we ride
Closed in steel, up there, outside
Through our port-holes see the vast
Heaven-scape go rushing past.
Shall we? All that meets the eye
Is sky and stars, stars and sky.

Points of light with black between
Hang like a painted scene
Motionless, no nearer there
Than on Earth, everywhere
Equidistant from our ship.
Heaven has given us the slip.

Hush, be still. Outer space
Is a concept, not a place.
Try no more. Where we are
Never can be sky or star.
From prison, in a prison, we fly;
There's no way into the sky.

C S Lewis

The Condemned

There is a wildness still in England that will not feed
In cages; it shrinks away from the touch of the trainer's hand,
Easy to kill, not easy to tame. It will never breed
In a zoo for the public pleasure. It will not be planned.

Do not blame us too much if we that are hedgerow folk
Cannot swell the rejoicings at this new world you make -
We, hedge-hogged as Johnson or Borrow, strange to the yoke
As Landor, surly as Cobbett (that badger), birdlike as Blake.

A new scent troubles the air -- to you, friendly perhaps
But we with animal wisdom have understood that smell.
To all our kind its message is Guns, Ferrets, and Traps,
And a Ministry gassing the little holes in which we dwell.

C S Lewis

The Country of the Blind

Hard light bathed them—a whole nation of eyeless men,
Dark bipeds not aware how they were maimed. A long
Process, clearly, a slow curse,
Drained through centuries, left them thus.

At some transitional stage, then, a luckless few,
No doubt, must have had eyes after the up-to-date,
Normal type had achieved snug
Darkness, safe from the guns of heavn;

Whose blind mouths would abuse words that belonged to their
Great-grandfathers, unabashed, talking of light in some
Eunuch'd, etiolated,
Fungoid sense, as a symbol of

Abstract thoughts. If a man, one that had eyes, a poor
Misfit, spoke of the grey dawn or the stars or green-
Sloped sea waves, or admired how
Warm tints change in a lady's cheek,

None complained he had used words from an alien tongue,
None question'd. It was worse. All would agree 'Of course,'
Came their answer. "We've all felt
Just like that." They were wrong. And he

Knew too much to be clear, could not explain. The words --
Sold, raped flung to the dogs -- now could avail no more;
Hence silence. But the mouldwarps,
With glib confidence, easily

Showed how tricks of the phrase, sheer metaphors could set
Fools concocting a myth, taking the worlds for things.
Do you think this a far-fetched
Picture? Go then about among

Men now famous; attempt speech on the truths that once,
Opaque, carved in divine forms, irremovable,
Dear but dear as a mountain-
Mass, stood plain to the inward eye.

C S Lewis

The Meteorite

Among the hills a meteorite
Lies huge; and moss has overgrown,
And wind and rain with touches light
Made soft, the contours of the stone.

Thus easily can Earth digest
A cinder of sidereal fire,
And make her translunary guest
The native of an English shire.

Nor is it strange these wanderers
Find in her lap their fitting place,
For every particle that's hers
Came at the first from outer space.

All that is Earth has once been sky;
Down from the sun of old she came,
Or from some star that travelled by
Too close to his entangling flame.

Hence, if belated drops yet fall
From heaven, on these her plastic power
Still works as once it worked on all
The glad rush of the golden shower.

C S Lewis