

POEMS

BY

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To my Mother:

Between these covers find my petty rhymes
And take them to you as you took each one
As it was written. May they bring at times
Fresh visions of the days when they were done.
And if by chance some stranger praise their worth,
Take you the praise - in me you gave them birth.

Inscription in a leather bound book
of my handwritten poems

A Midland Park.

A staunch old oak of the forest,
Knotted and gnarled and grim,
Is standing beside the ancient drive
In the bracken's farthest rim.
Wild is the park around him,
Forsaken the manor hall,
King of the forest still he stands
With the bracken as his thrall.

A change has come over the forest,
And now on the old oak's bark
Is a hoop of white to brand him
He is doomed for an axeman's mark.
No more is the drive forsaken
No more is the house unsold,
For a new-rich profiteer townsman
Is exchanging beauty for gold.

undated. Probably 1922 or 1923.
Seen out hunting in Yoxall park.
According to my father's diary,
this was the last remains
of the ancient Forest of Needwood.
Printed in the Lancing Miscellany
July 1926.

The Butterfly.

My glory is but for a passing day ;
Yet though my form dies quickly as it came,
My life is all in sunshine, and I pass
Away from light into that gloomy depth
From which my beauty came. I like it so,
For thus in my short day I see all things
Illumined as a lamp is in the dark,
And everything is beautiful. And so
The horrors of the world in which I live
Are only shown me as I slowly die.

Lancing. 1924/5 ?

The Puddle.

A puddle in the moonlight
The size of a man's hand,
With the shadow of a straight tree
Across it like a band;
A black strip on the mirror
Made silver by the moon,
On the little puddle on the path
Made this afternoon.
The wind ruffles across it,
And the black shadows skim
And shimmer back to shape again
After their sudden swim.:
It won't be there tomorrow
Winking back at the moon,
But tonight it lies in the moonlight
Like a little lost lagoon.

July 1925.

Written in the sanatorium at Lancing,
when I had mumps.

Printed in the Lancing Miscellany
March 1926.

Also printed in a book of Lancing Verse.

Sonnet - A Chalk Pit.

Two stunted pine trees mark its farthest edge,
Covered with passionate ivy - creeper bound ;
The other side is hidden by a hedge
Of broken bushes, pushing from a ground
Whitened with chalk and cool with long,rank grass,
Within, the undergrowth is creeper-mazed_
And bramble-choked in patches; you may pass
Between the bushes, by a pathway blazed
By berry-hunting children ; but within
The wilderness is broken by a heap
Of blackened cinders, shells of egg and tin,
On which a myriad bloated creatures creep
Seeking a living from the putrid pile,
And with man's aid making a fair place vile.

undated. about 1924-5.
Lancing.
The chalk pit was the one
above the college
on the edge of the downs
towards the Ring.

The Shore.

A Towering cliff, with a riot of boulders,
And loose earth tunnelled away,
With a sulky stream, from between gaunt shoulders,
Squirming into the bay ;
Then mile upon mile of shelving sands
Down to the water side,
Where a patient, solitary fisherman stands
Passing a line through his horny hands,
With his fingers upon the tide.

And beyond the sand, and over the shingle,
The laughing, bubbling foam
Of the ocean waters ripple and mingle
And race from the sea for home.
The sun is shining out over the sea,
Where a cobweb of mist still lies,
Drifting and turning swiftly to flee,
And wisping indeterminately
Under the fisherman's eyes.

undated. 1925/6.
Printed in the Lancing Miscellany,
July 1926.
Memories of the shore
near my prep school
at Furzie Close, New Milton, Hants.

Mole-Hills.

Among the tufted, tumbled tussocks
On the weather-yellowed downs,
I saw the multitudinous earth-works
Of many mole-hill towns.

Down in the damp and earthiness
Beneath the pushed up piles of clay,
Black industry was scooping out
A narrow passage-way.

And, as I watched, I saw the builder
Delving the downs to make his home,
And raising out of crumbling earth
His little palace-dome.

undated, but certainly 1926.
Published in the
Lancing College Magazine,
July 1926.

Sonnet – To a Pencil.

A man to his pencil.

You, that must write whate'er my will dictates,
And set on paper every inmost thought ;
You whose fair imprint on the paper states
What I desire; you that can alter nought
Unless MY brain commands, MY firm hand guides
Thine every movement; friend, what power hast thou?

The pencil replies.

I know your secrets, every move confides
New trust in me; but though I bend and bow,
I cannot tell the secrets I have left
In black and white upon the letter's page;
Each sadly written word leaves me bereft
Of part of me, adds to my yellow age,
But when my point lies broken on the floor
Even THY will can make me write no more!

undated. 1925/6.
Published in the
Lancing College Magazine
July 1926.

Thistledown.

A little wisp of thistledown
Flitting through the air,
Drifting up and down the fields,
Dipping here and there
To kiss the dying grasses
That are turning into hay,
Then up again and out again
And off another way.

• • •
The traffic rumbles through the town,
The people sweat and swear,
And dust and disagreeableness
Are rampant everywhere ;
When down the street comes flitting,
A stranger to the town,
A very harbinger of peace,
The wisp of thistledown.

• • •
The day has lost its gloominess,
The town its grime and heat,
For through it stirs a gentle breeze
On dainty dancing feet;
And tripping on its farthest fringe,
Along the weary town,
Is blown - the gayest sprite of June –
The wisp of thistledown.

July 1926.

Lancing Chapel in the Twenties.

It stands against the tempest's shook,
The trump of music's din,
Counting as friends the gale without
And bent of smith within.

Note.

Dick Gale was the works foreman.
Brent-Smith was the organist

The dewdrop.

Silver-cold in the morning air,
As bright as flashing gem,
A drop of dew is glistening
Upon a grasses stem;
And all the flowers frown at it,
In wakening surprise,
As laughingly it glints around
A million winking eyes.

Along the grass comes stealthily
A first faint ray of dawn;
It slowly reaches to the dew
Across the silent lawn;
And as it lightly touches it
A myriad colours blaze
Awakening all the garden
With the beauty of their rays.

The flowers gaze in wonderment
At such a coloured gem,
The dewdrop in magnificence
Sits gazing back at them;
Then suddenly the sun appears,
And in its brilliant ray
The dewdrop gives a final glint
And vanishes away.

August 1926

Snowdrops.

All along the drive the snow is falling
Petal by petal 'tis forming its array,
Till the grass is white with it
And all the world bright with it
And still it goes on falling through a sky grown grey.

Far across the world the snow is thawing
Softened by winds which sweep from far away
Till the earth lies green again
And Spring is queen again,
With sunshine glinting fitfully across the misty day.

And lo! along the drive are snowdrops growing
Till all the world around is but a garden gay
Till the grass is white with them
And everywhere bright with them
Growing where a week ago the drifting snowflakes lay.

December 1926.

Sonnet – Evening, Oxford.

Come to the hushed expectancy of night
Out in the garden, when the day is done.
Curtain behind thee visions of the light
And choose the beauty that is scarce begun.
Then be content to feel the moon unfold
Her lucent feathers over the tired earth ;
All the day long a thousand deeds untold
Passing have traced the history of their birth
Only to die unnumbered. In this place
Unhinge those troubles gendered of the light
And free thy conscience from the close embrace
That all day long has burdened it with pain ;
Then turn toward the windows of the night
With soul unhindered and untroubled brain.

Summer 1927
New College

'That enter in as guests unannounced..' (Coleridge).

There must have been someone; for out of the silence
The catch had suddenly sprung
And unloosed the door to swing itself open –
But surely no bell was rung?
Surely no footfall sent its arrival
Echoing on before?
Then who was this that came so swiftly
And opened wide the door?
Who was it who stood unseen on the threshold?
Whence had this presence sprung?
That came in a moment and now was gone
Unheralded and unsung?
For at once as it went the night gave back
The song she had sung before
The thousand inanimate sounds that were dumb
When Death flung wide the door.

18 July 1928.
New College, Oxford

Poplars.

Like sentinels they stand
To guard the countryside;
Three equidistant poplars –
Silent, dignified.

Then, from the west, there lifts a puff of breeze
Upon that trio of unheeding trees;
Laughingly scatters through them on its way
And leaves, in passing, every leaf astray.
For as a crowd delighted will employ
A sea of clapping hands to show its joy,
So, dancing upwards, like some madcap elf
Each leaf, bewitched, jigs round upon itself,
Flutters a flitting moment on its bough,
Is still again, and look upon them now -
Like sentinels they stand
To guard the countryside;
Three equidistant poplars -
Silent, dignified.

Undated but
probably Summer 1928
at Villiers Vineux, France.

To a poet.

'How did you know it was like that too
So wonderfully true?
'How did you capture that just-right word
To express what you meant,
'And flash in a sentence so nearly absurd
Your intent?
'From whence did you cull that miraculous phrase?'
“From the Ancient of Days.”

August 1928.

Sonnet – Ah! Do not read...

Ah! Do not read upon an afternoon
When beauty's glance is breathlessly intent;
Waste not the moments that must lose so soon
Their swift communion of wonderment.
What phrase can limn the incense-murmuring rose
When its soft self droops blooming from its spray,
Or written word against God's golden prose
Compare at all in passionate display?
Pen may depict that sweeping laze of hill-
Like some sleek animal beneath the sun –
Stretched in a plenitude of pleasure, till
Your very self with all the world is one?
Of every glory lay a store instead
That all your winters may be garlanded.

Sonnet - Shall nature then...?

Shall nature then desert our countryside
As all the fays have done? Shall she depart
And take, lamented not, that humble pride
An earlier England wedded to its heart?
Will sordid pleasures blind us to the birth
She grants to us in each new-wakened day?
Is Love-of-Beauty vanished from the earth,
And Peacefulness become the sport of play?

• • •

No, there are some to whom she beckons yet,
To whom her tender music makes appeal;
No, there are some unwilling to forget
The ecstasy she gives their souls to feel.
Nature yet lingers, let us keep her then
Before the eyes, within the hearts, of men.

Pastoral.

By day if you should choose to pass,
'Tis but a lonely pond.
The cows have trodden down the grass
And churned the mud beyond.
One tree leans out upon the pool-
One straggling hedgerow thorn,
Tows led with hay-wisps, and the wool
From sheep in drinking torn.
It spoils the great field's green expanse,
How could so poor a place entrance?

Yet I have seen it beautiful –
A mirror to the moon,
The thorn as slender threads to pull
The ripples silver spoon.
When all the world in darkness lay,
Upon that elfin stage
Breathless I've seen the moonbeams play
As beauty's embassy
Its foil the great fields dim expanse
How could such beauty not entrance?

Love's error.

Softly I saw him cross the lawn,
That little naked child,
I saw within his eyes the dawn
And the sunset mild;
With all creation pregnant in his hand
He stood - a tiny tyrant in the land.

I saw his tender toes upon the grass,
His smile of wonderment;
I turned to see the way he'd pass,
He dimpled as he went,
Then stooped to pick a daisy up
And put it with his buttercup.

You saw him not; your sweet grey eyes
Were smiling with the Spring,
Who gave you back his gayest skies
And sent his birds to sing.
But the boy with the flowers in his crumpled fist
Came back for some he'd missed.

And then in delight at a sudden thought
He turned to us again,
And he took from his back the bow he'd brought,
And a bliss of pain
Swept over me, as his pointed dart
Imbedded itself in my heart.

Then he turned to you, with a child's delight
In his newest toy;
And he pulled his bow with all his might –
That puny boy ;
But his aim was wrong, and the dart went by
Unnoticed into the painted sky.

He puckered his lips and turned to go,
And as he went there came
The silver tears of a world of woe
And his sobs of shame :
For he left behind in the wound he'd given
A hell for love, when he meant a heaven.

Undated.

The stick-gatherer.

Beneath the trees they huddle brokenly,
Storm-raddled twigs so short and old,
Lying where the winds lean hands have shaken them
Upon the autumn mould.

Slowly with syncopated shuffle
The woman is gathering them;
Loosing each one from crabbed old fingers
Within her apron's hem.

Huddled beside her fire in the evening,
Who knows but what she sees
The smoke from the twigs entrancingly taking
Their shapes as heavenly trees.

Not dated, but Oxford 1930.

Dead flowers by request.

So when I come to die
Throw no fresh flowers to me;
I have loved them in my life
Bury them not that be.

But take some old dead flowers
Whose fragrance has gone on,
That they and I may cross together
The unknown Rubicon.

12 July 1932.

Beneath this tree

Note. When the new road was being cut from Mankoya to Mongu in 1934/5 it passed through an ancient forest of big trees just on the Mongu side of the border. When one huge old tree was felled, a blacksmith's kit of tools was found and this inspired this poem. The kit was sent down to the Rhodes-Livingstone Museum.

Beneath this tree how many years ago
Some aged native wrought at axe and hoe ;
By patient labour and from ancient rule
Fashioned his metal into finished tool:
Followed the dictates of immortal lore
And from a flooded plain drew out the yellowed ore.
Here did he sit day long above his fire
To give his tribe the tools they would require,
And here beneath this tree, long hidden, find
Those very tools that ancient used to mind.

undated, but about 1934/5.
Mankoya.

Camp fire, Mankoya.

Great dead trees fallen in the forests that have bred them
Gross bodies mouldering into the loam of years;
Their shroud the leaves - their children 'tis that shed them –
The gentle rain for tears.

Dead are their bodies, but their souls are hidden
Bound in quick horror to a slow decay :
Those souls that brought each year the spring unbidden
From some dim yesterday.

So when I sit and watch those bodies burning
I see their spirits freed at last of fears –
Released, their spirits to the spring returning—
There is no need for tears.

8 September 1935
Mankoya,
Northern Rhodesia

Moonshine.

Up, up in the sea of night I saw the moon go by.
She was a galleon sailing light
Alone, aloof and high.

And I was a child on a nursery floor
Heaving a childish sigh
For I loved the moon, oh, I loved her sore,
Alone, aloof and high.

And the moon smiled down on me lying there
Smiled as she said goodbye,
For she knew to what I was now aware –
Alone, aloof and high.

Up, up in the sea of night
I saw the moon go by,
Saw her as beauty, knew beauty by sight,
Alone, aloof and high.

Undated.
Probably in the thirties
in Northern Rhodesia.

Blindness in Spring.

I wander through a lovely wood,
Led by the hand I love;
My blindness sees the stately trees
But as she says I should.
The blueness of the skies above,
The thrushes nest, all that is best
Is hidden from my sightless mind
By cruel chance and fate unkind.

She talks to me of all she sees,
But how am I to tell
What 'tis she means, by all the scenes
She sees within the dell?
For when she talks of reds and greens
And white and pink, she seems to think
I see each colour in my mind,
Although my eyes are dead and blind.

I miss the beauties I should see:
My fate is hard to bear:
I wander round familiar ground,
With beauty every-where:
Yet though I know that flowers abound
And know each tree, I cannot see
The things that Nature meant for all,
From happy king to toiling thrall.

Hark, what is that across the lawn?
Whose silvery notes are those?
They thrill my ear; so sweet and clear
They give my soul repose.
The thrushes' song at least I hear;
Its charm to me, who cannot see,
Is greater than to those who can –
Earth shows herself to everyman.

Undated.

Probably 1922 or 1923.

It is ironical that the writer became
for most of his life deaf to bird song.
Printed in the Lancing Miscellany,
March 1926.

Beauty.

Discovered beauty is a theft of time,
A moment stolen from the power sublime.
Time wanders on, unknowing, brute and grim,
Beauty has held us, stolen an hour from him.
Beauty that springs to ever-living life,
Is born and dies not, takes our souls to wife
An endless instant, then from our wedded mind
Flees as a vision flees to one that's blind
Yet sees in glimpses. We are left to grope
In misted darkness for the song of hope
She left behind her. Some may never see
Her passing more than once; others will flee
From that one glimpse which reft them out of self
And let them see a nobler world than pelf.
Others again, too blind have ever been
To hold the secret that their eyes have seen.
The most of us will gather as we can
A little beauty to our lotted span,
Cozen her coming to us till we find
When beauty passes, she has left behind
For moments further on, a hazard seed
Deep in our mould, to fashion as we need.

• • •

We are but mortals, moulded of a stuff
That lives to perish; we have souls enough
If we would tend them, but the world slips by

And leaves its impress on the precious diet;
Then, when a hazard shows us beauty's dress
We cannot see for very worldliness.
Beauty is there, if we had eyes to see,
Beauty is waiting, loves not mystery,
Is at our feet if we but stooped, around
If we had power to raise us from a ground
Of our own choosing. Beauty never hides
Or favours with her graces; at our sides
She waits to smile, an uncapricious she:
Beauty is ever near to those that see.

Undated.
Probably in the thirties
in Northern Rhodesia.

Sonnet – Health, Wealth and Wisdom.

Health, wealth and wisdom God to Solomon gave
For choice. He wisdom chose; yet there may be
A greater benison in life, and free
Is each to squander it or save,
Pass heedless by, or cherish to the grave
This greater blessing. Happier man is he,
Who, as he travels through the world can see,
And seeing, on his inmost soul engrave
Things only beautiful. Health has here no sway-
Visions like these a leper could attain –
While even the wealth of nations could not pay
For what each ragged pauper may retain
Wisdom takes to herself too high a way
To know that beauty is the balm of pain.

If you were here

If you were here I should not need to write.
Whence then the pleasure that is mine tonight?
If I wrote not, you would not write to me
And I would lose my little of delight.

Sonnet - Birth.

I saw Spring happen on a barren tree
And make it beautiful: that youngest birth
That greens the beeches or with witchery
Is born rose-leaved to grace a dimmer earth.
I saw the gloom of a cathedral glow
Into a consummation of delight,
Each window flaunting from its molten bow
A nobler story of the dawn of light.
But I have known a greater birth than these,
A birth inspired by holier than sun
And lovelier than Spring; its mysteries
Were in a duller clay enflamed, begun:
For in my heart Love found a dwelling-place
Born of the soul enfathomed in your face.

undated.

Probably at Cambridge in 1951.

NORTHERN RHODESIA AT 70

SOME REFLECTIONS
ON THE 70th ANNIVERSARY
OF THE FOUNDING OF
NORTHERN RHODESIA

Some years ago I read in a paper an article which has remained in my mind ever since. It told the story of a journalist who was living and working in France. As he moved about his daily duties, he kept on hearing a name mentioned in connection with a time when everything was wonderful and all the people had lived a perfect life. At first he wondered if this was during the life of some early king such as Charlemagne, but the facts did not seem to fit in with any particular person. He wondered if the references were to some amalgamation of personalities from the past, but this did not also fit in. After a year or so he decided that he really must make an effort and find out who this person was who was remembered with such gratitude. Eventually he discovered that it was another name for the last English Administrator in Aquitaine, before that area of France was re-conquered and merged into the France of today.

When I first read this story, I could not help wondering if sometime in the future the same thing might happen in the then Northern Rhodesia, and whether the English would be

remembered with gratitude for the work we have done
when we were serving there.

I dream of a day far in the future when a visitor from these
islands will go to the rural parts of that country and be told
of someone remembered by his African name in whose
time there was peace and plenty in the land. He will be told
of officials remembered for their honesty, their integrity,
and their courage, who lived far from their own kind, and
worked for the advancement and progress of the Africans.

We shall not have been forgotten.

Gervas Clay
1994