

Classic Poetry Series

Archibald MacLeish

- poems -

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An Eternity

There is no dusk to be,
There is no dawn that was,
Only there's now, and now,
And the wind in the grass.

Days I remember of
Now in my heart, are now;
Days that I dream will bloom
White the peach bough.

Dying shall never be
Now in the windy grass;
Now under shaken leaves
Death never was.

Archibald MacLeish

Ars Poetica

A poem should be palpable and mute
As a globed fruit

Dumb
As old medallions to the thumb

Silent as the sleeve-worn stone
Of casement ledges where the moss has grown -

A poem should be wordless
As the flight of birds

A poem should be motionless in time
As the moon climbs

Leaving, as the moon releases
Twig by twig the night-entangled trees,

Leaving, as the moon behind the winter leaves,
Memory by memory the mind -

A poem should be motionless in time
As the moon climbs

A poem should be equal to:
Not true

For all the history of grief
An empty doorway and a maple leaf

For love
The leaning grasses and two lights above the sea -

A poem should not mean
But be

Archibald MacLeish

Baccalaureate

A year or two, and grey Euripides,
And Horace and a Lydia or so,
And Euclid and the brush of Angelo,
Darwin on man, Vergilius on bees,
The nose and Dialogues of Socrates,
Don Quixote, Hudibras and Trinculo,
How worlds are spawned and where the dead gods go,--
All shall be shard of broken memories.

And there shall linger other, magic things,--
The fog that creeps in wanly from the sea,
The rotten harbor smell, the mystery
Of moonlit elms, the flash of pigeon wings,
The sunny Green, the old-world peace that clings
About the college yard, where endlessly
The dead go up and down. These things shall be
Enchantment of our heart's remembering.

And these are more than memories of youth
Which earth's four winds of pain shall blow away;
These are earth's symbols of eternal truth,
Symbols of dream and imagery and flame,
Symbols of those same verities that play
Bright through the crumbling gold of a great name.

Archibald MacLeish

Dr. Sigmund Freud Discovers the Sea Shell

Science, that simple saint, cannot be bothered
Figuring what anything is for:
Enough for her devotions that things are
And can be contemplated soon as gathered.

She knows how every living thing was fathered,
She calculates the climate of each star,
She counts the fish at sea, but cannot care
Why any one of them exists, fish, fire or feathered.

Why should she? Her religion is to tell
By rote her rosary of perfect answers.
Metaphysics she can leave to man:
She never wakes at night in heaven or hell

Staring at darkness. In her holy cell
There is no darkness ever: the pure candle
Burns, the beads drop briskly from her hand.

Who dares to offer Her the curled sea shell!
She will not touch it!--knows the world she sees
Is all the world there is! Her faith is perfect!

And still he offers the sea shell . . .

What surf
Of what far sea upon what unknown ground
Troubles forever with that asking sound?
What surge is this whose question never ceases?

Archibald MacLeish

Poem in Prose

This poem is for my wife.
I have made it plainly and honestly:
The mark is on it
Like the burl on the knife.

I have not made it for praise.
She has no more need for praise
Than summer has
Or the bright days.

In all that becomes a woman
Her words and her ways are beautiful:
Love's lovely duty,
the well-swept room.

Wherever she is there is sun
And time and a sweet air:
Peace is there,
Work done.

There are always curtains and flowers
And candles and baked bread
And a cloth spread
And a clean house.

Her voice when she sings is a voice
At dawn by a freshening spring
Where the wave leaps in the wind
And rejoices.

Wherever she is it is now.
It is here where the apples are:
Here in the stars,
In the quick hour.

The greatest and richest good,
My own life to live in,
This she has given me --

If giver could.

Archibald MacLeish

The End of the World

Quite unexpectedly, as Vasserot
The armless ambidextrian was lighting
A match between his great and second toe,
And Ralph the lion was engaged in biting
The neck of Madame Sossman while the drum
Pointed, and Teeny was about to cough
In waltz-time swinging Jocko by the thumb
Quite unexpectedly to top blew off:

And there, there overhead, there, there hung over
Those thousands of white faces, those dazed eyes,
There in the starless dark, the poise, the hover,
There with vast wings across the cancelled skies,
There in the sudden blackness the black pall
Of nothing, nothing, nothing -- nothing at all.

Archibald MacLeish

The Snowflake Which Is Now and Hence Forever

Will it last? he says.
Is it a masterpiece?
Will generation after generation
Turn with reverence to the page?

Birdseye scholar of the frozen fish,
What would he make of the sole, clean, clear
Leap of the salmon that has disappeared?

To be, yes!--whether they like it or not!
But not to last when leap and water are forgotten,
A plank of standard pinkness in the dish.

They also live
Who swerve and vanish in the river.

Archibald MacLeish

The Too-Late Born

We too, we too, descending once again
The hills of our own land, we too have heard
Far off --- Ah, que ce cor a longue haleine ---
The horn of Roland in the passages of Spain,
The first, the second blast, the failing third,
And with the third turned back and climbed once more
The steep road southward, and heard faint the sound
Of swords, of horses, the disastrous war,
And crossed the dark defile at last, and found
At Roncevaux upon the darkening plain
The dead against the dead and on the silent ground
The silent slain---

Archibald MacLeish

Two Poems from the War

Oh, not the loss of the accomplished thing!
Not dumb farewells, nor long relinquishment
Of beauty had, and golden summer spent,
And savage glory of the fluttering
Torn banners of the rain, and frosty ring
Of moon-white winters, and the imminent
Long-lunging seas, and glowing students bent
To race on some smooth beach the gull's wing:

Not these, nor all we've been, nor all we've loved,
The pitiful familiar names, had moved
Our hearts to weep for them; but oh, the star
The future is! Eternity's too wan
To give again that undefeated, far,
All-possible irradiance of dawn.

Like moon-dark, like brown water you escape,
O laughing mouth, O sweet uplifted lips.
Within the peering brain old ghosts take shape;
You flame and wither as the white foam slips
Back from the broken wave: sometimes a start,
A gesture of the hands, a way you own
Of bending that smooth head above your heart,--
Then these are varied, then the dream is gone.

Oh, you are too much mine and flesh of me
To seal upon the brain, who in the blood
Are so intense a pulse, so swift a flood
Of beauty, such unceasing instancy.
Dear unimagined brow, unvisioned face,
All beauty has become your dwelling place.

Archibald MacLeish

You, Andrew Marvell

And here face down beneath the sun
And here upon earth's noonward height
To feel the always coming on
The always rising of the night:

To feel creep up the curving east
The earthy chill of dusk and slow
Upon those under lands the vast
And ever climbing shadow grow

And strange at Ecbatan the trees
Take leaf by leaf the evening strange
The flooding dark about their knees
The mountains over Persia change

And now at Kermanshah the gate
Dark empty and the withered grass
And through the twilight now the late
Few travelers in the westward pass

And Baghdad darken and the bridge
Across the silent river gone
And through Arabia the edge
Of evening widen and steal on

And deepen on Palmyra's street
The wheel rut in the ruined stone
And Lebanon fade out and Crete
high through the clouds and overblown

And over Sicily the air
Still flashing with the landward gulls
And loom and slowly disappear
The sails above the shadowy hulls

And Spain go under and the shore
Of Africa the gilded sand
And evening vanish and no more
The low pale light across that land

Nor now the long light on the sea:

And here face downward in the sun
To feel how swift how secretly
The shadow of the night comes on...

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