

Classic Poetry Series

Christopher John Brennan

- poems -

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Autumn

Autumn: the year breathes dully towards its death,
beside its dying sacrificial fire;
the dim world's middle-age of vain desire
is strangely troubled, waiting for the breath
that speaks the winter's welcome malison
to fix it in the unremembering sleep:
the silent woods brood o'er an anxious deep,
and in the faded sorrow of the sun,
I see my dreams' dead colours, one by one,
forth-conjur'd from their smouldering palaces,
fade slowly with the sigh of the passing year.
They wander not nor wring their hands nor weep,
discrown'd belated dreams! but in the drear
and lingering world we sit among the trees
and bow our heads as they, with frozen mouth,
looking, in ashen reverie, towards the clear
sad splendour of the winter of the far south.

Christopher John Brennan

Because She Would Ask Me Why I Loved Her

If questioning would make us wise
No eyes would ever gaze in eyes;
If all our tale were told in speech
No mouths would wander each to each.

Were spirits free from mortal mesh
And love not bound in hearts of flesh
No aching breasts would yearn to meet
And find their ecstasy complete.

For who is there that lives and knows
The secret powers by which he grows?
Were knowledge all, what were our need
To thrill and faint and sweetly bleed?

Then seek not, sweet, the "If" and "Why"
I love you now until I die.
For I must love because I live
And life in me is what you give.

Christopher John Brennan

Epilogue: 1908

The droning tram swings westward: shrill
the wire sings overhead, and chill
midwinter draughts rattle the glass
that shows the dusking way I pass
to yon four turreted square tower
that still exalts the golden hour
where youth, initiate once, endears
a treasure richer with the years.

Dim-seen, the upper stories fleet
along the twisting shabby street;
beneath, the shop-fronts' cover'd ways
bask in their lampions' orange blaze,
or stare phantasmal, weirdly new,
in the electric's' ghastly blue:
and, up and down, I see them go,
along the windows pleas'd and slow
but hurrying where the darkness falls,
the city's drift of pavement thralls
whom the poor pleasures of the street
lure from their niggard homes, to meet
and mix, unknown, and feel the bright
banality 'twixt them and night:
so, in my youth, I saw them flit
where their delusive dream was lit;
so now I see them, and can read
the urge of their unwitting need
one with my own, however dark,
and questing towards one mother-ark.
But, past the gin-shop's ochrous flare,
sudden, a gap of quiet air
and gather'd dark, where, set a pace
beyond the pavement's coiling race
and mask'd by bulk of sober leaves,
the plain obtruncate chancel heaves,
whose lancet-windows faintly show
suffusion of a ruddy glow,
the lamp of adoration, dim
and rich with unction kept for Him
whom Bethlehem's manger first made warm,
the sweetest god in human form,
love's prisoner in the Eucharist,
man's pleading, patient amorist:
and there the sacring laver stands
where I was brought in pious hands,
a chrisom-child, that I might be
accepted of that company
who, thro' their journeying, behold
beyond the apparent heavens, controu'd
to likeness of a candid rose,
ascending where the gold heart glows,
cirque within cirque, the blessed host,

their kin, their comfort, and their boast.

With them I walk'd in love and awe
till I was ware of that grim maw
and lazar-pit that reek'd beneath:
what outcast howlings these? what teeth
gnashing in vain? and was that bliss
whose counter-hemisphere was this?
and could it be, when times fulfill'd
had made the tally of either guild,
that this mid-world, dredged clean in both,
should no more bar their gruesome troth?
So from beneath that choiring tent
I stepp'd, and tho' my spirit's bent
was dark to me as yet, I sought
a sphere appeas'd and undistraught;
and found viaticum and goal
in that hard atom of the soul,
that final grain of deathless mind,
which Satan's watch-fiends shall not find
nor the seven mills of darkness bruise,
for all permission to abuse;
stubborn, yet, if one seek aright,
translucent all within and bright
with sheen that bath no paradigm,
not where our proud Golcondas brim,
tho' sky and sea and leaf and flower,
in each rare mood of virtual power,
sleep in their gems' excepted day:
and so, nor long, the guarded ray
broke on my eagerness, who brought
the lucid diamond-probe of thought
and, driving it behind, the extreme
blind vehemence of travailing dream
against the inhibitory shell:
and found, no grim eternal cell
and presence of the shrouded Norn,
but Eden, clad in nuptial mom,
young, fair, and radiant with delight
remorse nor sickness shall requite.

Yes, Eden was my own, my bride;
whatever malices denied,
faithful and found again, nor long
absent from aura of wooing song:
but promis'd only, while the sun
must travel yet thro' times undone;
and life must guard the prize of youth,
and thought must steward into truth
the mines of magian ore divined
in rich Cipangos of the mind:
and I, that made my high attempt

no bliss whence any were exempt,
their fellow-pilgrim, I must greet
these listless captives of the street,
these fragments of an orphan'd drift
whose dower was our mother's thrift,
and, tho' they know it not, have care
of what would be their loving prayer
if skill bestow'd might, help them heed
their craving for the simple meed
to be together in the light
when loneliness and dark incite:
long is the way till we are met
where Eden pays her hoarded debt
and we are orb'd in her, and she
hath still'd her hungering to be,
with plentitude beyond impeach,
single, distinct, and whole in each:
and many an evening hour shall bring
the dark crowd's dreary loitering
to me who pass and see the tale
of all my striving, bliss or bale,
dated from either spire that strives
clear of the shoal of shiftless lives,
and promise, in all years' despite,
fidelity to old delight.

Christopher John Brennan

Fire in the Heavens

Fire in the heavens, and fire along the hills,
and fire made solid in the flinty stone,
thick-mass'd or scatter'd pebble, fire that fills
the breathless hour that lives in fire alone.

This valley, long ago the patient bed
of floods that carv'd its antient amplitude,
in stillness of the Egyptian crypt outspread,
endures to drown in noon-day's tyrant mood.

Behind the veil of burning silence bound,
vast life's innumerable busy littleness
is hush'd in vague-conjectured blur of sound
that dulls the brain with slumbrous weight, unless

some dazzling puncture let the stridence throng
in the cicada's torture-point of song.

Christopher John Brennan

I Am Shut Out Of Mine Own Heart

I am shut out of mine own heart
because my love is far from me,
nor in the wonders have I part
that fill its hidden empery:

the wildwood of adventurous thought
and lands of dawn my dream had won,
the riches out of Faery brought
are buried with our bridal sun.

And I am in a narrow place,
and all its little streets are cold,
because the absence of her face
has robb'd the sullen air of gold.

My home is in a broader day:
at times I catch it glistening
thro' the dull gate, a flower'd play
and odour of undying spring:

the long days that I lived alone,
sweet madness of the springs I miss'd,
are shed beyond, and thro' them blown
clear laughter, and my lips are kiss'd:

- and here, from mine own joy apart,
I wait the turning of the key: -
I am shut out of mine own heart
because my love is far from me

Christopher John Brennan

I said, This Misery Must End

I SAID, This misery must end:
Shall I, that am a man and know
that sky and wind are yet my friend,
sit huddled under any blow?
so speaking left the dismal room
and stept into the mother-night
all fill'd with sacred quickening gloom
where the few stars burn'd low and bright,
and darkling on my darkling hill
heard thro' the beaches' sullen boom
heroic note of living will
rung trumpet-clear against the fight;
so stood and heard, and rais'd my eyes
erect, that they might drink of space,
and took the night upon my face,
till time and trouble fell away
and all my soul sprang up to feel
as one among the stars that reel
in rhyme on their rejoicing way,
breaking the elder dark, nor stay
but speed beyond each trammelling gyre,
till time and sorrow fall away
and night be wither'd up, and fire
consume the sickness of desire.

Christopher John Brennan

My Heart Was Wandering in the Sands

MY heart was wandering in the sands,
a restless thing, a scorn apart;
Love set his fire in my hands,
I clasp'd the flame unto my heart.

Surely, I said, my heart shall turn
one fierce delight of pointed flame;
and in that holocaust shall burn
its old unrest and scorn and shame:

surely my heart the heavens at last
shall storm with fiery orisons,
and know, enthroned in the vast,
the fervid peace of molten suns.

The flame that feeds upon my heart
fades or flares, by wild winds controll'd;
my heart still walks a thing apart,
my heart is restless as of old.

Christopher John Brennan

O White Wind, Numbing the World

O WHITE wind, numbing the world
to a mask of suffering hate!
and thy goblin pipes have skirl'd
all night, at my broken gate.

O heart, be hidden and kept
in a half-light colour'd and warm,
and call on thy dreams that have slept
to charm thee from hate and harm.

They are gone, for I might not keep;
my sense is beaten and dinn'd;
there is no peace but a grey sleep
in the pause of the wind.

Christopher John Brennan

Poppies

Where the poppy-banners flow
in and out amongst the corn,
spotless morn
ever saw us come and go

hand in hand, as girl and boy
warming fast to youth and maid,
half afraid
at the hint of passionate joy

still in Summer's rose unshown:
yet we heard nor knew a fear;
strong and clear
summer's eager clarion blown

from the sunrise to the set:
now our feet are far away,
night and day,
do the old-known spots forget?

Sweet, I wonder if those hours
breathe of us now parted thence,
if a sense
of our love-birth thrill their flowers.

Poppies flush all tremulous --
has our love grown into them,
root and stem;
are the red blooms red with us?

Summer's standards are outroll'd,
other lovers wander slow;
I would know
if the morn is that of old.

Here our days bloom fuller yet,
happiness is all our task;
still I ask --
do the vanish'd days forget?

Christopher John Brennan

Quis Pro Domino

Quis Pro Domino?

Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord, I will repay--
Ay' verily: and by ministry of such men
As did His will upon the Saracen:
And Christendom owns not that man today
Who deems it not the holiest task to slay,
So utterly, that they rise not again,
Yon blatant heathenrie, past human ken
Outlawed to death, its raving spawn and prey.
And thou has lit one flame of love and wrath,
Who, all unterrified, didst take thy stand,
And tear the Beast, and baulk him of his spring.
O noble Belgium, lion in the path;
An inch of sword holding a foot of land;
A folk of men, showing a man for King!

Christopher John Brennan

Romance

Of old, on her terrace at evening
...not here...in some long-gone kingdom
O, folded close to her breast!...

--our gaze dwelt wide on the blackness
(was it trees? or a shadowy passion
the pain of an old-world longing
that it sobb'd, that it swell'd, that it shrank?)
--the gloom of the forest
blurr'd soft on the skirt of the night-skies
that shut in our lonely world.

...not here...in some long-gone world...

close-lock'd in that passionate arm-clasp
no word did we utter, we stirr'd not:
the silence of Death, or of Love...
only, round and over us
that tearless infinite yearning
and the Night with her spread wings rustling
folding us with the stars.

...not here...in some long-gone kingdom
of old, on her terrace at evening
O, folded close to her heart!...

Christopher John Brennan

Spring Breezes

Spring breezes over the blue,
now lightly frolicking in some tropic bay,
go forth to meet her way,
for here the spell hath won and dream is true.

O happy wind, thou that in her warm hair
mayst rest and play!
could I but breathe all longing into thee,
so were thy viewless wing
as flame or thought, hastening her shining way.

And now I bid thee bring
tenderly hither over a subject sea
that golden one whose grace hath made me king,
and, soon to glad my gaze at shut of day,
loosen'd in happy air
her charmed hair.

Christopher John Brennan

Summer Noon

Fire in the heavens, and fire along the hills,
and fire made solid in the flinty stone,
thick-massed or scattered pebble, fire that fills
the breathless hour that lives in fire alone.
This valley, long ago the patient bed
of floods that carved its antient amplitude,
in stillness of the Egyptian crypt outspread,
endures to drown in noon-day's tyrant mood.
Behind the veil of burning silence bound,
vast life's innumerable busy littleness
is hushed in vague-conjectured blur of sound
that dulls the brain with slumbrous weight, unless
some dazzling puncture let the stridence throng
in the cicada's torture-point of song.

Christopher John Brennan

Sweet Silence After Bells

Sweet silence after bells!
deep in the enamour'd ear
soft incantation dwells.

Filling the rapt still sphere
a liquid crystal swims,
precarious yet clear.

Those metal quiring hymns
shaped ether so succinct:
a while, or it dislimns,

the silence, wanly print
with forms of lingering notes,
inhabits, close. distinct;

and night, the angel, floats
on wings of blessing spread
o'er all the gather'd cotes

where meditation, wed
with love, in gold-lit cells,
absorbs the heaven that shed
sweet silence after bells.

Christopher John Brennan

The Pangs That Guard The Gates Of Joy

THE PANGS that guard the gates of joy,
the naked sword that will be kist,
how distant seem'd they to the boy,
white flashes in the rosy mist!

Ah, not where tender play was screen'd
in the light heart of leafy mirth
of that obdurate might we ween'd
that shakes the sure repose of earth.

And sudden, 'twixt a sun and sun,
the veil of dreaming is withdrawn:
lo, our disrupt dominion
and mountains solemn in the dawn;

hard paths that chase the dayspring's white,
and glooms that hold the nether heat:
oh, strange the world upheaved from night,
oh, dread the life before our feet!

Christopher John Brennan

The Yellow Gas

The yellow gas is fired from street to street
past rows of heartless homes and hearths unlit,
dead churches, and the unending pavement beat
by crowds - say rather, haggard shades that flit

round nightly haunts of their delusive dream,
where'er our paradisaic instinct starves: -
till on the utmost post, its sinuous gleam
crawls in the oily water of the wharves;

where Homer's sea loses his keen breath, hemm'd
what place rebellious piles were driven down -
the priestlike waters to this task condemn'd
to wash the roots of the inhuman town! -

where fat and strange-eyed fish that never saw
the outer deep, broad halls of sapphire light,
glut in the city's draught each nameless maw:
- and there, wide-eyed unto the soulless night,

methinks a drown'd maid's face might fitly show
what we have slain, a life that had been free,
clean, large, nor thus tormented - even so
as are the skies, the salt winds and the sea.

Ay, we had saved our days and kept them whole,
to whom no part in our old joy remains,
had felt those bright winds sweeping thro' our soul
and all the keen sea tumbling in our veins,

had thrill'd to harps of sunrise, when the height
whitens, and dawn dissolves in virgin tears,
or caught, across the hush'd ambrosial night,
the choral music of the swinging spheres,

or drunk the silence if nought else - But no!
and from each rotting soul distill in dreams
a poison, o'er the old earth creeping slow,
that kills the flowers and curdles the live streams,

that taints the fresh breath of re-risen day
and reeks across the pale bewildered moon:
- shall we be cleans'd and how? I only pray,
red flame or deluge, may that end be soon!

Christopher John Brennan