

Classic Poetry Series

Dame Edith Sitwell

- poems -

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Aubade

JANE, Jane,
Tall as a crane,
The morning light creaks down again;

Comb your cockscomb-ragged hair,
Jane, Jane, come down the stair.

Each dull blunt wooden stalactite
Of rain creaks, hardened by the light,

Sounding like an overtone
From some lonely world unknown.

But the creaking empty light
Will never harden into sight,

Will never penetrate your brain
With overtones like the blunt rain.

The light would show (if it could harden)
Eternities of kitchen garden,

Cockscomb flowers that none will pluck,
And wooden flowers that 'gin to cluck.

In the kitchen you must light
Flames as staring, red and white,

As carrots or as turnips shining
Where the cold dawn light lies whining.

Cockscomb hair on the cold wind
Hangs limp, turns the milk's weak mind . . .

Jane, Jane,
Tall as a crane,
The morning light creaks down again!

Dame Edith Sitwell

Bells Of Gray Crystal

Bells of gray crystal
Break on each bough--
The swans' breath will mist all
The cold airs now.
Like tall pagodas
Two people go,
Trail their long codas
Of talk through the snow.
Lonely are these
And lonely and I
The clouds, gray Chinese geese
Sleek through the sky.

Dame Edith Sitwell

By The Lake

ACROSS the flat and the pastel snow
Two people go 'And do you remember
When last we wandered this shore?' . . . 'Ah no!
For it is cold-hearted December.'
'Dead, the leaves that like asses's ears hung on the trees
When last we wandered and squandered joy here;
Now Midas your husband will listen for these
Whispers--these tears for joy's bier.'
And as they walk, they seem tall pagodas;
And all the ropes let down from the cloud
Ring the hard cold bell-buds upon the trees--codas
Of overtones, ecstasies, grown for love's shroud

Dame Edith Sitwell

Came the Great Popinjay

CAME the great Popinjay
Smelling his nosegay:
In cages like grots
The birds sang gavottes.
'Herodiade's flea
Was named sweet Amanda,
She danced like a lady
From here to Uganda.
Oh, what a dance was there!
Long-haired, the candle
Salome-like tossed her hair
To a dance tune by Handel.' . . .
Dance they still? Then came
Courtier Death,
Blew out the candle flame
With civet breath.

Dame Edith Sitwell

Clowns' Houses

BENEATH the flat and paper sky
The sun, a demon's eye,
Glowed through the air, that mask of glass;
All wand'ring sounds that pass

Seemed out of tune, as if the light
Were fiddle-strings pulled tight.
The market-square with spire and bell
Clanged out the hour in Hell;

The busy chatter of the heat
Shrilled like a parakeet;
And shuddering at the noonday light
The dust lay dead and white

As powder on a mummy's face,
Or fawned with simian grace
Round booths with many a hard bright toy
And wooden brittle joy:

The cap and bells of Time the Clown
That, jangling, whistled down
Young cherubs hidden in the guise
Of every bird that flies;

And star-bright masks for youth to wear,
Lest any dream that fare
--Bright pilgrim--past our ken, should see
Hints of Reality.

Upon the sharp-set grass, shrill-green,
Tall trees like rattles lean,
And jangle sharp and dissily;
But when night falls they sign

Till Pierrot moon steals slyly in,
His face more white than sin,
Black-masked, and with cool touch lays bare
Each cherry, plum, and pear.

Then underneath the veiled eyes
Of houses, darkness lies--
Tall houses; like a hopeless prayer
They cleave the sly dumb air.

Blind are those houses, paper-thin
Old shadows hid therein,
With sly and crazy movements creep
Like marionettes, and weep.

Tall windows show Infinity;
And, hard reality,

The candles weep and pry and dance
Like lives mocked at by Chance.

The rooms are vast as Sleep within;
When once I ventured in,
Chill Silence, like a surging sea,
Slowly enveloped me.

Dame Edith Sitwell

Four in the Morning

Cried the navy-blue ghost
Of Mr. Belaker
The allegro Negro cocktail-shaker,
"Why did the cock crow,
Why am I lost,
Down the endless road to Infinity toss'd?
The tropical leaves are whispering white
As water; I race the wind in my flight.
The white lace houses are carried away
By the tide; far out they float and sway.
White is the nursemaid on the parade.
Is she real, as she flirts with me unafraid?
I raced through the leaves as white as water...
Ghostly, flowed over the nursemaid, caught her,
Left her...edging the far-off sand
Is the foam of the sirens' Metropole and Grand;
And along the parade I am blown and lost,
Down the endless road to Infinity toss'd.
The guinea-fowl-plumaged houses sleep...
On one, I saw the lone grass weep,
Where only the whimpering greyhound wind
Chased me, raced me, for what it could find."
And there in the black and furry boughs
How slowly, coldly, old Time grows,
Where the pigeons smelling of gingerbread,
And the spectacled owls so deeply read,
And the sweet ring-doves of curded milk
Watch the Infanta's gown of silk
In the ghost-room tall where the governante
Gesticulates lente and walks andante.
'Madam, Princesses must be obedient;
For a medicine now becomes expedient--
Of five ingredients--a diapente,
Said the governante, fading lente...
In at the window then looked he,
The navy-blue ghost of Mr. Belaker,
The allegro Negro cocktail-shaker--
And his flattened face like the moon saw she--
Rhinoceros-black (a flowing sea!).

Dame Edith Sitwell

Still Falls the Rain

Still falls the Rain---
Dark as the world of man, black as our loss---
Blind as the nineteen hundred and forty nails
Upon the Cross.

Still falls the Rain
With a sound like the pulse of the heart that is changed to the hammer-beat
In the Potter's Field, and the sound of the impious feet

On the Tomb:
 Still falls the Rain

In the Field of Blood where the small hopes breed and the human brain
Nurtures its greed, that worm with the brow of Cain.

Still falls the Rain
At the feet of the Starved Man hung upon the Cross.
Christ that each day, each night, nails there, have mercy on us---
On Dives and on Lazarus:
Under the Rain the sore and the gold are as one.

Still falls the Rain---
Still falls the Blood from the Starved Man's wounded Side:
He bears in His Heart all wounds,---those of the light that died,
The last faint spark
In the self-murdered heart, the wounds of the sad uncomprehending dark,
The wounds of the baited bear---
The blind and weeping bear whom the keepers beat
On his helpless flesh... the tears of the hunted hare.

Still falls the Rain---
Then--- O Ile leape up to my God: who pulles me doune---
See, see where Christ's blood streames in the firmament:
It flows from the Brow we nailed upon the tree

Deep to the dying, to the thirsting heart
That holds the fires of the world,---dark-smirched with pain
As Caesar's laurel crown.

Then sounds the voice of One who like the heart of man
Was once a child who among beasts has lain---
"Still do I love, still shed my innocent light, my Blood, for thee."

Dame Edith Sitwell

The Fan

LOVELY Semiramis
Closes her slanting eyes:
Dead is she long ago.
From her fan, sliding slow,
Parrot-bright fire's feathers,
Gilded as June weathers,
Plumes bright and shrill as grass
Twinkle down; as they pass
Through the green glooms in Hell
Fruits with a tuneful smell,
Grapes like an emerald rain,
Where the full moon has lain,
Greengages bright as grass,
Melons as cold as glass,
Piled on each gilded booth,
Feel their cheeks growing smooth.
Apes in plumed head-dresses
Whence the bright heat hisses,--
Nubian faces, sly
Pursing mouth, slanting eye,
Feel the Arabian
Winds floating from the fan.

Dame Edith Sitwell

When Cold December

WHEN cold December
Froze to grisamber
The jangling bells on the sweet rose-trees--
Then fading slow
And furred is the snow
As the almond's sweet husk--
And smelling like musk.
The snow amygdaline
Under the eglantine
Where the bristling stars shine
Like a gilt porcupine--
The snow confesses
The little Princesses
On their small chioppines
Dance under the orpines.
See the casuistries
Of their slant fluttering eyes--
Gilt as the zodiac
(Dancing Herodiac).
Only the snow slides
Like gilded myrrh--
From the rose-branches--hides
Rose-roots that stir.

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