

Classic Poetry Series

David Gascoyne

- poems -

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And the Seventh Dream is the Dream of Isis

1

white curtains of infinite fatigue
dominating the starborn heritage of the colonies of St Francis
white curtains of tortured destinies
inheriting the calamities of the plagues
of the desert encourage the waistlines of women to expand
and the eyes of men to enlarge like pocket-cameras
teach children to sin at the age of five
to cut out the eyes of their sisters with nail-scissors
to run into the streets and offer themselves to unfrocked priests
teach insects to invade the deathbeds of rich spinsters
and to engrave the foreheads of their footmen with purple signs
for the year is open the year is complete
the year is full of unforeseen happenings
and the time of earthquakes is at hand

today is the day when the streets are full of hearses
and when women cover their ring fingers with pieces of silk
when the doors fall off their hinges in ruined cathedrals
when hosts of white birds fly across the ocean from america
and make their nests in the trees of public gardens
the pavements of cities are covered with needles
the reservoirs are full of human hair
fumes of sulphur envelop the houses of ill-fame
out of which bloodred lilies appear.

2

across the square where crowds are dying in thousands
a man is walking a tightrope covered with moths

there is an explosion of geraniums in the ballroom of the hotel
there is an extremely unpleasant odour of decaying meat
arising from the depetalled flower growing out of her ear
her arms are like pieces of sandpaper
or wings of leprous birds in taxis
and when she sings her hair stands on end
and lights itself with a million little lamps like glowworms
you must always write the last two letters of her christian name
upside down with a blue pencil

she was standing at the window clothed only in a ribbon
she was burning the eyes of snails in a candle
she was eating the excrement of dogs and horses
she was writing a letter to the president of france

3

the edges of leaves must be examined through microscopes
in order to see the stains made by dying flies
at the other end of the tube is a woman bathing her husband

and a box of newspapers covered with handwriting
when an angel writes the word TOBACCO across the sky
the sea becomes covered with patches of dandruff
the trunks of trees burst open to release streams of milk
little girls stick photographs of genitals to the windows of their homes
prayerbooks in churches open themselves at the death service
and virgins cover their parents' beds with tealeaves
there is an extraordinary epidemic of tuberculosis in yorkshire
where medical dictionaries are banned from the public libraries
and salt turns a pale violet colour every day at seven o'clock
when the hearts of troubadours unfold like soaked mattresses
when the leaven of the gruesome slum-visitors
and the wings of private airplanes look like shoeleather
shoeleather on which pentagrams have been drawn
shoeleather covered with vomitings of hedgehogs
shoeleather used for decorating wedding-cakes
and the gums of queens like glass marbles
queens whose wrists are chained to the walls of houses
and whose fingernails are covered with little drawings of flowers
we rejoice to receive the blessing of criminals
and we illuminate the roofs of convents when they are hung
we look through a telescope on which the lord's prayer has been written
and we see an old woman making a scarecrow
on a mountain near a village in the middle of spain
we see an elephant killing a stag-beetle
by letting hot tears fall onto the small of its back
we see a large cocoa-tin full of shapeless lumps of wax
there is a horrible dentist walking out of a ship's funnel
and leaving behind him footsteps which make noises
on account of his accent he was discharged from the sanatorium
and sent to examine the methods of cannibals
so that wreaths of passion-flowers were floating in the darkness
giving terrible illnesses to the possessors of pistols
so that large quantities of rats disguised as pigeons
were sold to various customers from neighbouring towns
who were adepts at painting gothic letters on screens
and at tying up parcels with pieces of grass
we told them to cut off the buttons on their trousers
but they swore in our faces and took off their shoes
whereupon the whole place was stifled with vast clouds of smoke
and with theatres and eggshells and droppings of eagles
and the drums of the hospitals were broken like glass
and glass were the faces in the last looking-glass.

David Gascoyne

Orpheus In The Underworld

Curtains of rock
And tears of stone,
Wet leaves in a high crevice of the sky:
From side to side the draperies
Drawn back by rigid hands.

And he came carrying the shattered lyre,
And wearing the blue robes of a king,
And looking through eyes like holes torn in a screen;
And the distant sea was faintly heard,
From time to time, in the suddenly rising wind,
Like a broken song.

Out of his sleep, from time to time,
From between half open lips,
Escaped the bewildered words which try to tell
The tale of his bright night
And his wing-shadowed day
The soaring flights of thought beneath the sun
Above the islands of the seas
And all the deserts, all the pastures, all the plains
Of the distracting foreign land.

He sleeps with the broken lyre between his hands,
And round his slumber are drawn back
The rigid draperies, the tears and wet leaves,
Cold curtains of rock concealing the bottomless sky.

David Gascoyne

Perpetual Winter Never Known

When the light falls on winter evenings
And the river makes no sound in its passing
Behind the house, is silent but for its cold
Flowing, its reeds frozen stiffer than glass
How can one anticipate the dawn, a sudden
Blazing of sunlight thawing the harshest sky?
How can one not remember summer evenings?
Must not the tired heart sink and must not fear
Bite, like an acid, wrinkles in its stone?

Behind drawn curtains, gazing at the fire,
Think how the earth spins dumb and bound
By iron chains of frost through death-still air;
And how in every street the sealed windows
And orange cubes of firelight, how in houses
Cuckoo-clocks imitate the spring, candles are
Suns. Perpetual winter never known,
Families warm their hands and wait, nor
Ever doubt the season's transience.

David Gascoyne

Salvador Dali

The face of the precipice is black with lovers;
The sun above them is a bag of nails; the spring's
First rivers hide among their hair.
Goliath plunges his hand into the poisoned well
And bows his head and feels my feet walk through his brain.
The children chasing butterflies turn round and see him there
With his hand in the well and my body growing from his head,
And are afraid. They drop their nets and walk into the wall like smoke.

The smooth plain with its mirrors listens to the cliff
Like a basilisk eating flowers.
And the children, lost in the shadows of the catacombs,
Call to the mirrors for help:
'Strong-bow of salt, cutlass of memory,
Write on my map the name of every river.'

A flock of banners fight their way through the telescoped forest
And fly away like birds towards the sound of roasting meat.
Sand falls into the boiling rivers through the telescopes' mouths
And forms clear drops of acid with petals of whirling flame.
Heraldic animals wade through the asphyxia of planets,
Butterflies burst from their skins and grow long tongues like plants,
The plants play games with a suit of mail like a cloud.

Mirrors write Goliath's name upon my forehead,
While the children are killed in the smoke of the catacombs
And lovers float down from the cliffs like rain.

David Gascoyne

Snow in Europe

Out of their slumber Europeans spun
Dense dreams: appeasements, miracle, glimpsed flash
Of a new golden era; but could not restrain
The vertical white weight that fell last night
And made their continent a blank.

Hush, says the sameness of the snow
The Ural and Jura now rejoin
The furthest Arctic's desolation. All is one;
Sheer monotone: plain, mountain; country, town:
Contours and boundaries no longer show.

The warring flags hang colourless a while;
Now midnight's icy zero feigns a truce
Between the signs and seasons, and fades out
All shots and cries. But when the great thaw comes,
How red shall be the melting snow, how loud the drums!

David Gascoyne

Spring MCMXL

London Bridge is falling down, Rome's burnt and Babylon
The Great is now but dust; yet still Spring must
Swing back through Time's continual arc to earth.
Though every land become as a black field
Dunged with the dead, drenched by the dying's blood,
Still must a punctual goddess waken and ascend
The rocky stairs, up into earth's chilled air,
And pass upon her mission through those carrion ranks,
Picking her way among a maze of broken brick
To quicken with her footsteps the short sooty grass between;
While now once more their futile matchwood empires flare and blaze
And through the smoke men gaze with bloodshot eyes
At the translucent apparition, clad in trembling nascent green
Of one they still can recognize, though scarcely understand.

David Gascoyne

The Cage

In the waking night
The forests have stopped growing
The shells are listening
The shadows in the pools turn grey
The pearls dissolve in the shadow
And I return to you

Your face is marked upon the clockface,
My hands are beneath your hair
And if the time you mark sets free the birds
And if they fly away towards the forest
The hour will no longer be ours

Ours is the ornate birdcage
The brimming cup of water
The preface to the book
And all the clocks are ticking
All the dark rooms are moving
All the air's nerves are bare.

Once flown
The feathered hour will not return
And I shall have gone away.

David Gascoyne

The Cubical Domes

Indeed indeed it is growing very sultry
The indian feather pots are scrambling out of the room
The slow voice of the tobacconist is like a circle
Drawn on the floor in chalk and containing ants
And indeed there is a shoe upon the table
And indeed it is as regular as clockwork
Demonstrating the variability of the weather
Or denying the existence of manu altogether
For after all why should love resemble a cushion
Why should the stumbling-block float up towards the ceiling
And in our attic it is always said
That this is a sombre country the wettest place on earth
And then there is the problem of living to be considered
With its vast pink parachutes full of underdone mutton
Its tableaux of the archbishops dressed in their underwear
Have you ever paused to consider why grass is green
Yes greener at least it is said than the man in the moon
Which is why

The linen of flat countries basks in the tropical sun
And the light of the stars is attracted by transparent flowers
And at last is forgotten by both man and beast
By helmet and capstan and mesmerised nun
For the bounds of my kingdom are truly unknown
And its factories work all night long
Producing the strongest canonical wastepaper-baskets
And ant-eaters' skiing-shoes
Which follow the glistening murders as far as the pond
And then light a magnificent bonfire of old rusty nails
And indeed they are paid by the state for their crimes
There is room for them all in the conjuror's musical-box
There is still enough room for even the hardest of faces
For faces are needed to stick on the emperor's walls
To roll down the stairs like a party of seafaring christians
Whose hearts are on fire in the snow.

David Gascoyne

The End is Near the Beginning

Yes you have said enough for the time being
There will be plenty of lace later on
Plenty of electric wool
And you will forget the eglantine
Growing around the edge of the green lake
And if you forget the colour of my hands
You will remember the wheels of the chair
In which the wax figure resembling you sat

Several men are standing on the pier
Unloading the sea
The device on the trolley says MOTHER'S MEAT
Which means *Until the end*.

David Gascoyne

The Truth is Blind

The light fell from the window and the day was done
Another day of thinking and distractions
Love wrapped in its wings passed by and coal-black Hate
Paused on the edge of the cliff and dropped a stone
From which the night grew like a savage plant
With daggers for its leaves and scarlet hearts
For flowers - then the bed
Rose clocklike from the ground and spread its sheets
Across the shifting sands

Autumnal breath of mornings far from here
A star veiled in grey mist
A living man:

The snapping of a dry twig was his only announcement. The two men, who had tied their boat to a branch that grew out over the water's edge, and were now moving up through the rank tropical vegetation, turned sharply.

He raised his eyes and saw the river's source
Between their legs - he saw the flaming sun
He saw the buildings in between the leaves
Behind their heads that were as large as globes
He heard their voices indistinct as rain
As faint as feathers falling
And he fell

The boat sailed on
The masts were made of straw
The sails were made of finest silken thread
And out of holes on either side the prow
Gushed endless streams of water and of flame
In which the passengers saw curious things:

The conjurer, we are told, 'took out of his bag a silken thread, and so projected it upwards that it stuck fast in a certain cloud of air. Out of the same receptacle he pulled a hare, that ran away up along the thread; a little beagle, which when it was slipped at the hare pursued it in full cry; last of all a small dogboy, whom he commanded to follow both hare and hound up the thread. From another bag that he had he extracted a winsome young woman, at all points well adorned, and instructed her to follow after hound and dogboy.'

She laughed to see them gazing after her
She clapped her hands and vanished in thin air
To reappear upon the other bank
Among the restless traffic of the quays
Her silhouette against the dusty sky
Her shadow falling on the hungry stones
Where sat the pilot dressed in mud-stained rags

He knocked the fragile statue down
And ate her sugar head
And then the witnesses all gathered round

And pointed at the chasm at his feet:

Clouds of blue smoke, sometimes mixed with black, were being emitted from the exhaust pipe. The smoke was of sufficient density to be an annoyance to the driver following the vehicle or to pedestrians.

The whispering of unseen flames
A sharp taste in the mouth.

David Gascoyne

The Very Image - To Rene Magritte

An image of my grandmother
her head appearing upside-down upon a cloud
the cloud transfixed on the steeple
of a deserted railway-station
far away

An image of an aqueduct
with a dead crow hanging from the first arch
a modern-style chair from the second
a fir-tree lodged in the third
and the whole scene sprinkled with snow

An image of a piano-tuner
with a basket of prawns on his shoulder
and a firescreen under his arm
his moustache made of clay-clotted twigs
and his cheeks daubed with wine

An image of an aeroplane
the propellor is rashers of bacon
the wings are of reinforced lard
the tail is made of paper-clips
the pilot is a wasp

An image of the painter
with his left hand in a bucket
and his right hand stroking a cat
as he lies in bed
with a stone beneath his head

And all these images
and many others
are arranged like waxworks
in model bird-cages
about six inches high.

David Gascoyne

The Writer's Hand

What is your want, perpetual invalid
Whose fist is always beating on my breast's
Bone wall, incurable dictator of my house
And breaker of its peace? What is your will,
Obscure uneasy sprite : where must I run,
What must I seize, to win
A brief respite from your repining cries?

Is it a star, the passionate short spark
Produced by friction with another's flesh
You ache more darkly after. Is it power :
To snap restriction's leash, to leap
Like bloodhounds on the enemy? There is no grip
Can crush the fate you fight. Or is it to escape
Into the dream-perspectives maps and speed create?

You never listen, disillusion's dumb
To your unheeding ear. But see my hand,
The only army to enforce your claim
Upon life's hostile land : five pale, effete
Aesthetic-looking fingers, whose chief feat
Is to trace lines like these across a page :
What small relief can they bring to your siege!

David Gascoyne

Yves Tanguy

The worlds are breaking in my head
Blown by the brainless wind
That comes from afar
Swollen with dusk and dust
And hysterical rain

The fading cries of the light
Awaken the endless desert
Engrossed in its tropical slumber
Enclosed by the dead grey oceans
Enclasped by the arms of the night

The worlds are breaking in my head
Their fragments are crumbs of despair
The food of the solitary damned
Who await the gross tumult of turbulent
Days bringing change without end.

The worlds are breaking in my head
The fuming future sleeps no more
For their seeds are beginning to grow
To creep and to cry midst the
Rocks of the deserts to come

Planetary seed
Sown by the grotesque wind
Whose head is so swollen with rumours
Whose hands are so urgent with tumours
Whose feet are so deep in the sand.

David Gascoyne