

Classic Poetry Series

Edgar Bowers

- poems -

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Amor Vincit Omnia

Love is no more.
It died as the mind dies: the pure desire
Relinquishing the blissful form it wore,
The ample joy and clarity expire.

Regret is vain.
Then do not grieve for what you would efface,
The sudden failure of the past, the pain
Of its unwilling change, and the disgrace.

Leave innocence,
And modify your nature by the grief
Which poses to the will indifference
That no desire is permanent in sense.

Take leave of me.
What recompense, or pity, or deceit
Can cure, or what assumed serenity
Conceal the mortal loss which we repeat?

The mind will change, and change shall be relief.

Submitted by Gnute

Edgar Bowers

For Louis Pasteur

How shall a generation know its story
If it will know no other? When, among
The scoffers at the Institute, Pasteur
Heard one deny the cause of child-birth fever,
Indignantly he drew upon the blackboard,
For all to see, the Streptococcus chain.
His mind was like Odysseus and Plato
Exploring a new cosmos in the old
As if he wrote a poem--his enemy
Suffering, disease, and death, the battleground
His introspection. "Science and peace," he said,
"Will win out over ignorance and war,"
But then, the virus mutant in his vein,
"Death to the Prussian!" and "revenge, revenge!"

How shall my generation tell its story?
Their fathers jobless, boys for the CCC
And NYA, the future like a stairwell
To floors without a window or a door,
And then the army: bayonet drill and foxhole;
Bombing to rubble cities with textbook names
Later to bulldoze streets for; their green bodies
Drowned in the greener surfs of rumored France.
My childhood friend, George Humphreys, whom I still see
Still ten years old, his uncombed hair and grin
Moment by moment in the Hürtgen dark
Until the one step full in the sniper's sight,
His pastor father emptied by the grief.
Clark Harrison, at nineteen a survivor,
Never to walk or have a child or be
A senator or governor. Herr Wegner,
Who led his little troop, their standards high
And sabers drawn, against a panzer corps,
Emerging from among the shades at Dachau
Stacked like firewood for someone else to burn;
And Gerd Radomski, listening to broadcasts
Of names, a yearlong babel of the missing,
To find his wife and children. Then they came home,
Near middle age at twenty-two, to find
A new reunion of the church and state,
Cynical Constantines who need no name,
Domestic tranquility beaten to a sword,
Sons wasted by another lie in Asia,
Or Strangeloves they had feared that August day;
And they like runners, stung, behind a flag,
Running within a circle, bereft of joy.

Hearing of the disaster at Sedan
And the retreat worse than the one from Moscow,
Their son among the missing or the dead,
Pasteur and his wife Mary hired a carriage
And, traveling to the east where he might try

His way to Paris, stopping to ask each youth
And comfort every orphan of the state's
Irascibility, found him at last
And, unsurprised, embraced and took him in.
Two wars later, the Prussian, once again
The son of Mars, in Paris, Joseph Meister--
The first boy cured of rabies, now the keeper
Of Pasteur's mausoleum--when commanded
To open it for them, though over seventy,
Lest he betray the master, took his life.

I like to think of Pasteur in Elysium
Beneath the sunny pine of ripe Provence
Tenderly raising black sheep, butterflies,
Silkworms, and a new culture, for delight,
Teaching his daughter to use a microscope
And musing through a wonder--sacred passion,
Practice and metaphysic all the same.
And, each year, honor three births: Valéry,
Humbling his pride by trying to write well,
Mozart, who lives still, keeping my attention
Repeatedly outside the reach of pride,
And him whose mark I witness as a trust.
Others he saves but could not save himself--
Socrates, Galen, Hippocrates--the spirit
Fastened by love upon the human cross.

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John

Before he wrote a poem, he learned the measure
That living in the future gives a farm--
Propinquity of mules and cows, the charmed
Insouciance of hens, the fellowship,
At dawn, of seed-time and of harvest-time.
But when high noon gave way to evening, and
The fences lay, bent shadows, on the crops
And pastures to the yellowing trees, he felt
The presences he felt when, over rocks,
Through pools and where it wears the bank, the stream
Ran bright and dark at once, itself its shadow;
And suffered, in all he knew, the antagonists
Related in the Bible, in himself
And every new condition from the beginning,
As in the autumn leaf and summer prime.
Therefore he chose to live the only game
Worthy of repetition, in the likeness
Of someone like himself, a race of which
He was the changing distances and ground,
The runners, and the goal that runs away
Forever into time; or like two players
At odds in white and black, their dignities
Triumphs refused or losses unredeemed.
For the one, that it be ever of the pure
Intention that he witnessed in the high
Stained windows of King's Chapel--ancestral stories,
The old above the new, like pages shining
From an essential book--he taught his mind
To imitate the meditation, sovereign
In verse and prose, of those who shared with him
Intelligence of beauty, good, and truth
As one, unchanging and unchangeable,
Disinterested excitement through a sentence
Their joy and passion. For the other, as
A venturer asleep, he went among
The voiceless and unvisionary many--
Like one who offers blood to know his fate
Or hold his twin again--deep in the midnight
Baths of New Orleans, on its plural beds
And on the secret banks beside its river,
The many who, anonymous as he was,
Uncannily resembled him, appearing
Immortal in a finitude of mirrors.

But when the sudden force of the disease
Tossed him, in a new garment, on the bed
Where he had wakened, mornings, as a child--
Despised by all the neighbors, helpless, blind
And vulnerable to every life, he listened
Intensely to the roosters, mules and cows
As well as to the voices of the desk,
The chair, the books and pictures, pastures and fields,

The tree of every season, the age of seas
And, on its surge, the age of galaxies,
The bells within the spires of Cambridge, bodies
And faces revealed or hidden in the flow,
All that we knew or could imagine joined
Together in the sound the stream flows through
As witness of itself in every change,
Each trusting in its continuities,
All turning in a final radiant shell.
Then, on his darkened eye, he saw himself
A compact disk awhirl, played by the light
He came from and was ready to reenter,
But not before he chose the way to go.
And so it was, before his death, he spoke
The poem that is his best, the final letter
To take to that old country as a passport.

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The Mountain Cemetery

With their harsh leaves old rhododendrons fill
The crevices in grave plots' broken stones.
The bees renew the blossoms they destroy,
While in the burning air the pines rise still,
Commemorating long forgotten biers.
Their roots replace the semblance of these bones.

The weight of cool, of imperceptible dust
That came from nothing and to nothing came
Is light within the earth and on the air.
The change that so renews itself is just.
The enormous, sundry platitude of death
Is for these bones, bees, trees, and leaves the same.

And splayed upon the ground and through the trees
The mountains' shadow fills and cools the air,
Smoothing the shape of headstones to the earth.
The rhododendrons suffer with the bees
Whose struggles loose ripe petals to the earth,
The heaviest burden it shall ever bear.

Our hard earned knowledge fits us for such sleep.
Although the spring must come, it passes too
To form the burden suffered for what comes.
Whatever we would give our souls to keep
Is merely part of what we call the soul;
What we of time would threaten to undo

All time in its slow scrutiny has done.
For on the grass that starts about the feet
The body's shadow turns, to shape in time,
Soon grown preponderant with creeping shade,
The final shadow that is turn of earth;
And what seems won paid for as in defeat.

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