Classic Poetry Series

Elinor Morton Wylie

- poems -

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Elinor Morton Wylie (September 7, 1885 – December 16, 1928)

Elinor Wylie was an American poet and novelist popular in the 1920s and 1930s. "She was famous during her life almost as much for her ethereal beauty and personality as for her melodious, sensuous poetry."

Family and Childhood

Elinor Wylie was born Elinor Morton Hoyt in Somerville, New Jersey, into a socially prominent family. Her grandfather, Henry M. Hoyt, was a governor of Pennsylvania. Her aunt was Helen Hoyt, a minor poet. Her parents were Henry Martyn Hoyt, Jr., who would be United States Solicitor General from 1903 to 1909; and Anne Morton McMichael (born July 31, 1861 in Pa.). Their other children were:

Henry Martyn Hoyt (May 8, 1887 in Pa. – 1920 in New York City) who married

Alice Gordon Parker (1885–1951)

Constance A. Hoyt (May 20, 1889 in Pa. – 1923 in Bavaria, Germany) who married Ferdinand von Stumm-Halberg on March 30, 1910 in Washington, D.C.

Morton McMichael Hoyt (born April 4, 1899 in Washington, D.C.), three times married and divorced Eugenia Bankhead, known as "Sister" and sister of

Tallulah Bankhead

Nancy McMichael Hoyt (born October 1, 1902 in Washington, D.C) romance novelist who wrote Elinor Wylie: The Portrait of an Unknown Woman (1935). She married Edward Davison Curtis; they divorced in 1932.

Elinor was educated at Miss Baldwin's School (1893–97), Mrs. Flint's School (1897–1901), and finally Holton-Arms School (1901–04). She was "trained for the life of a debutante and a society wife".

"As a girl she was already bookish—not in the languid or inactive sense but girded, embraced by books, between whose covers lay the word-perfect world she sought. She grew into a tall, dark beauty in the classic 1920s style. Some who knew her claimed she was the most striking woman they ever met."

Marriages and Scandal

The future Elinor Wylie "became notorious, in her time, for her multiple marriages and affairs". On the rebound from an earlier romance she met her first husband, Harvard graduate Philip Simmons Hichborn (1882–1912), the son of a rear-admiral. She eloped with him and they were married on December 13, 1906. She had a son by him, Philip Simmons Hichborn, Jr., born September 22, 1907 in Washington, D.C. However, "Hichborn, a would-be poet, was emotionally unstable", and Elinor found herself in an unhappy marriage.

She also found herself being stalked by Horace Wylie, "a Washington lawyer with a wife and three children", who "was 17 years older than Elinor. He stalked her for years, appearing wherever she was."

Following the death in November 1910 of Elinor's father, she left her husband and son, and began living with Wylie. "After being ostracized by their families and friends and mistreated in the press, the couple moved to England" where they lived "under the assumed name of Waring; this event caused a scandal in the Washington, D.C., social circles Elinor Wylie had frequented". Philip Simmons Hitchborn Sr. committed suicide in 1912.

With Horace Wylie's encouragement, in 1912 Elinor anonymously published Incidental Number, a small book of poems she had written in the previous decade.

Between 1914 and 1916, Elinor tried to have a second child, but "suffered several miscarriages ... as well as a stillbirth and ... a premature child who died after one week."

After Wylie's wife agreed to a divorce, the couple returned to the United States. Elinor and Horace Wylie married in 1916; "By that time, however, the couple were drawing apart."

Elinor began spending time in literary circles in New York City—"her friends there numbered John Peale Bishop, Edmund Wilson, John Dos Passos, Sinclair Lewis, Carl Van Vechten, and ... William Rose Benét."

Her last marriage (in 1923) was to William Rose Benét (February 2, 1886 – May 4, 1950), who was part of her literary circle and brother of Stephen Vincent Benét. By the time of Wylie's third book of poetry, Trivial Breath in 1928, her marriage with Benét was also in trouble, and they had agreed to live apart. She moved to England and fell in love with the husband of a friend, Henry de Clifford Woodhouse, to whom she wrote a series of 19 sonnets which she published privately in 1928 as Angels and Earthly Creatures (also included in her 1929 book of the same name).

Career

Elinor Wylie's literary friends encouraged her to submit her verse to Poetry magazine. Poetry published four of her poems, including what became "her most widely anthologized poem, 'Velvet Shoes'", in May 1920. With Benét now acting as her informal literary agent, "Wylie left her second husband and moved to New York in 1921". The Dictionary of Literary Biography (DLB) says: "She captivated the literary world with her slender, tawny-haired beauty, personal elegance, acid wit, and technical virtuosity."

In 1921, Wylie's first commercial book of poetry, Nets to Catch the Wind, was published. The book, "which many critics still consider to contain her best poems," was an immediate success. Edna St. Vincent Millay and Louis Untermeyer praised the work. The Poetry Society awarded her its Julia Ellsworth Ford Prize.

In 1923 she published Black Armor, which was "another successful volume of verse". The New York Times enthused: "There is not a misplaced word or cadence in it. There is not an extra syllable."

1923 also saw the publication of Wylie's first novel, Jennifer Lorn, to considerable fanfare. Van Vechten "organized a torchlight parade through Manhattan to celebrate its publication". She would write "four historical novels widely admired when first published, although interest in them diminished in the masculine era of the 1940s and 50s".

She worked as the poetry editor of Vanity Fair magazine between 1923 and 1925. She was an editor of Literary Guild, and a contributing editor of The New Republic, from 1926 through 1928.

Wylie was an "admirer of the British Romantic poets, and particularly of Shelley, to a degree that some critics have seen as abnormal". "A friend claimed she was 'positively dotty' about Shelley, not just making him her model in art and life but on occasion actually 'seeing' the dead poet." She wrote a 1926 novel, The Orphan Angel, in which "the great young poet is rescued from drowning off an Italian cape and travels to America, where he encounters the dangers of the frontier."

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Elinor Wylie died of a stroke at Benét's New York apartment, while working with him preparing the 1929 Angels and Earthly Creatures for publication.

Poetry

Wylie's "highly polished, articulate, and deeply emotional verse shows the influence of the metaphysical poets," such as John Donne, George Herbert, and Andrew Marvell. If her poetry is derivative of anyone, though, that would be "of the British Romantic poets, and particularly of Shelley," whom she admired "to a degree that some critics have seen as abnormal."

In her first book, Nets to Catch the Wind, "Stanzas and lines were quite short, and the effect of her images was of a highly detailed, polished surface. Often, her poems expressed a dissatisfaction with the realities of life on the part of a speaker who aspired to a more gratifying world of art and beauty." Louis Untermeyer wrote that the book "impresses immediately because of its brilliance ... which, at first, seems to sparkle without burning.... It is the brilliance of moon-light corruscating on a plain of ice. But if Mis. Wylie seldom allows her verses to grow agitated, she never permits them to remain dull.... in 'August' the sense of heat is conveyed by tropic luxuriance and contrast; in 'The Eagle and the Mole' she lifts didacticism to a proud level ... never has snow-silence been more unerringly communicated than in 'Velvet Shoes.' Other notable poems include "Wild Peaches," "A Proud Lady," "Sanctuary," "Winter Sleep," "Madman's Song," "The Church-Bell," and "A Crowded Trolley Car."

In Black Armor (1923), "the intellect has grown more fiery, the mood has grown warmer, and the craftsmanship is more dazzling than ever.... she varies the perfect modulation with rhymes that are delightfully acrid and unique departures which never fail of success ... from the nimble dexterity of a rondo like 'Peregrine' to the introspective poignance of 'Self Portrait,' from the fanciful 'Escape' to the grave mockery of 'Let No Charitable Hope.'

Trivial Breath (1928) "is the work of a poet in transition. At times the craftsman is uppermost; at times the creative genius."

Wylie's biographer Stanley Olson called the sonnets that begin 1929's Angels and Earthly Creatures "perhaps, her finest achievement.... The love in these lyrics is not a private love, not a variety of confession, but an abstracted one.... The nineteen sonnets are paced with strength, energy and undeniable feeling, sustained as a group by shifting through the complexities and vicissitudes of love." Untermeyer also praised the sonnets, but added: "The

other poems share this intensity. 'This Corruptible' is both visionary and philosophic; 'O Virtuous Light' deals with that piercing clarity, the intuition ... The other poems are scarcely less uplifted, finding their summit in 'Hymn to Earth, which is one of her deeper poems and one which is certain to endure."

Fiction

Wylie's four novels "are delicately wrought and filled with ironic fancy." They were "widely admired when first published, although interest in them diminished in the masculine era of the 1940s and 50s."

Eserleri:

Poetry

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Angels and Earthly Creatures. New York, London: Alfred A. Knopf, 1929. (includes Angels and Earthly Creatures: A Sequence of Sonnets).

Birthday Sonnet. New York: Random House, 1929.

Collected Poems of Elinor Wylie. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1932.

Last Poems of Elinor Wylie, transcribed by Jane D. Wise, foreword by William Rose Benet, tribute by Edith Olivier. New York: Knopf , 1943. Chicago: Academy, 1982.

Selected Works of Elinor Wylie. Evelyn Helmick Hively ed. Kent State U Press, 2005.

Novels

Jennifer Lorn: A Sedate Extravaganza. New York: Doran, 1923. London: Richards, 1924.

The Venetian Glass Nephew. New York: Doran, 1925. Chicago: Academy, 1984.

The Orphan Angel. New York: Knopf, 1926. Also published as Mortal Image. London: Heinemann, 1927.

Mr. Hodge & Mr. Hazard. New York. Knopf , 1928. London: Heinemann, 1928. Chicago: Academy, 1984.

Collected Prose of Elinor Wylie. New York: Knopf, 1933.

Fonds

Papers reside in the Elinor Wylie Archive, Beinecke Rare Book Room and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT, and in the Berg Collection, New York Public Library.

A Crowded Trolley-Car

The rain's cold grains are silver-gray
Sharp as golden sands,
A bell is clanging, people sway
Hanging by their hands.

Supple hands, or gnarled and stiff,
Snatch and catch and grope;
That face is yellow-pale, as if
The fellow swung from rope.

Dull like pebbles, sharp like knives,
Glances strike and glare,
Fingers tangle, Bluebeard's wives
Dangle by the hair.

Orchard of the strangest fruits
Hanging from the skies;
Brothers, yet insensate brutes
Who fear each other's eyes.

One man stands as free men stand,
As if his soul might be
Brave, unbroken; see his hand
Nailed to an oaken tree.

Elinor Morton Wylie

A Proud Lady

Hate in the world's hand
Can carve and set its seal
Like the strong blast of sand
Which cuts into steel.

I have seen how the finger of hate
Can mar and mould
Faces burned passionate
And frozen cold.

Sorrowful faces worn
As stone with rain,
Faces writhing with scorn
And sullen with pain.

But you have a proud face
Which the world cannot harm,
You have turned the pain to a grace
And the scorn to a charm.

You have taken the arrows and slings
Which prick and bruise
And fashioned them into wings
For the heels of your shoes.

From the world's hand which tries
To tear you apart
You have stolen the falcon's eyes
And the lion's heart.

What has it done, this world,
With hard finger-tips,
But sweetly chiseled and curled
Your inscrutable lips?

Elinor Morton Wylie

Atavism

I was always afraid of Somes's Pond:
Not the little pond, by which the willow stands,
Where laughing boys catch alewives in their hands
In brown, bright shallows; but the one beyond.
There, where the frost makes all the birches burn
Yellow as cow-lilies, and the pale sky shines
Like a polished shell between black spruce and pines,
Some strange thing tracks us, turning where we turn.

You'll say I dreamed it, being the true daughter
Of those who in old times endured this dread.
Look! Where the lily-stems are showing red
A silent paddle moves below the water,
A sliding shape has stirred them like a breath;
Tall plumes surmount a painted mask of death.

Elinor Morton Wylie

August

Why should this Negro insolently stride
Down the red noonday on such noiseless feet?
Piled in his barrow, tawnier than wheat,
Lie heaps of smouldering daisies, sombre-eyed,
Their copper petals shriveled up with pride,
Hot with a superfluity of heat,
Like a great brazier borne along the street
By captive leopards, black and burning pied.

Are there no water-lilies, smooth as cream,
With long stems dripping crystal? Are there none
Like those white lilies, luminous and cool,
Plucked from some hemlock-darkened northern stream
By fair-haired swimmers, diving where the sun
Scarce warms the surface of the deepest pool?

Elinor Morton Wylie

Beauty

Say not of beauty she is good,
Or aught but beautiful,
Or sleek to doves' wings of the wood
Her wild wings of a gull.

Call her not wicked; that word's touch
Consumes her like a curse;
But love her not too much, too much,
For that is even worse.

O, she is neither good nor bad,
But innocent and wild!
Enshrine her and she dies, who had
The hard heart of a child.

Elinor Morton Wylie

Bells in the Rain

Sleep falls, with limpid drops of rain,
Upon the steep cliffs of the town.
Sleep falls; men are at peace again
While the small drops fall softly down.

The bright drops ring like bells of glass
Thinned by the wind, and lightly blown;
Sleep cannot fall on peaceful grass
So softly as it falls on stone.

Peace falls unheeded on the dead
Asleep; they have had deep peace to drink;
Upon a live man's bloody head
It falls most tenderly, I think.

Elinor Morton Wylie

Blood Feud

Once, when my husband was a child, there came
To his father's table, one who called him kin,
In sunbleached corduroys paler than his skin.
His look was grave and kind; he bore the name
Of the dead singer of Senlac, and his smile.
Shyly and courteously he smiled and spoke;
"I've been in the laurel since the winter broke;
Four months, I reckon; yes, sir, quite a while."

He'd killed a score of foemen in the past,
In some blood feud, a dark and monstrous thing;
To him it seemed his duty. At the last
His enemies found him by a forest spring,
Which, as he died, lay bright beneath his head,
A silver shield that slowly turned to red.

Elinor Morton Wylie

Bronze Trumpets and Sea Water - On Turning Latin into English

Alembics turn to stranger things
Strange things, but never while we live
Shall magic turn this bronze that sings
To singing water in a sieve.

The trumpets of Cæsar's guard
Salute his rigorous bastions
With ordered bruit; the bronze is hard
Though there is silver in the bronze.

Our mutable tongue is like the sea,
Curled wave and shattering thunder-fit;
Dangle in strings of sand shall he
Who smoothes the ripples out of it.

Elinor Morton Wylie

Cold-Blooded Creatures

Man, the egregious egoist
(In mystery the twig is bent)
Imagines, by some mental twist,
That he alone is sentient

Of the intolerable load
That on all living creatures lies,
Nor stoops to pity in the toad
The speechless sorrow of his eyes.

He asks no questions of the snake,
Nor plumbs the phosphorescent gloom
Where lidless fishes, broad awake,
Swim staring at a nightmare doom.

Elinor Morton Wylie

Curious Circumstance

The sailorman's child
And the girl of the witch--
They can't be defiled
By touching pitch.

The sailorman's son
Had a ship for a nursery;
The other one
Was baptised by sorcery.

Although he's shipped
To the Persian Gulf, her
Body's been dipped
In burning sulphur.

Elinor Morton Wylie

Death and the Maiden

BARCAROLE ON THE STYX

Fair youth with the rose at your lips,
A riddle is hid in your eyes;
Discard conversational quips,
Give over elaborate disguise.

The rose's funeral breath
Confirms by intuitive fears;
To prove your devotion, Sir Death,
Avaunt for a dozen of years.

But do not forget to array
Your terror in juvenile charms;
I shall deeply regret my delay
If I sleep in a skeleton's arms.

Elinor Morton Wylie

Escape

When foxes eat the last gold grape,
And the last white antelope is killed,
I shall stop fighting and escape
Into a little house I'll build.

But first I'll shrink to fairy size,
With a whisper no one understands,
Making blind moons of all your eyes,
And muddy roads of all your hands.

And you may grope for me in vain
In hollows under the mangrove root,
Or where, in apple-scented rain,
The silver wasp-nests hang like fruit.

Elinor Morton Wylie

'Fire and Sleet and Candlelight'

For this you've striven
Daring, to fail:
Your sky is riven
Like a tearing veil.

For this, you've wasted
Wings of your youth;
Divined, and tasted
Bitter springs of truth.

From sand unslakèd
Twisted strong cords,
And wandering naked
Among trysted swords.

There's a word unspoken,
A knot untied.
Whatever is broken
The earth may hide.

The road was jagged
Over sharp stones:
Your body's too ragged
To cover your bones.

The wind scatters
Tears upon dust;
Your soul's in tatters
Where the spears thrust.

Elinor Morton Wylie

Incantation

A white well
In a black cave;
A bright shell
In a dark wave.

A white rose
Black brambles hood;
Smooth bright snows
In a dark wood.

A flung white glove
In a dark fight;
A white dove
On a wild black night.

A white door
In a dark lane;
A bright core
To bitter black pain.

A white hand
Waved from dark walls;
In a burnt black land
Bright waterfalls.

A bright spark
Where black ashes are;
In the smothering dark
One white star.

Elinor Morton Wylie

Les Lauriers Sont Coupée

Ah, love, within the shadow of the wood
The laurels are cut down; some other brows
May bear the classic wreath which Fame allows
And find the burden honorable and good.
Have we not passed the laurels as they stood--
Soft in the veil with which Spring endows
The wintry glitter of their woven boughs--
Nor stopped to break the branches while we could?

Ah, love, for other brows they are cut down.
Thornless and scentless are their stems and flowers,
And cold as death their twisted coronal.
Sweeter to us the sharpness of this crown;
Sweeter the wildest roses which are ours;
Sweeter the petals, even when they fall.

Elinor Morton Wylie

Little Joke

Stripping an almond tree in flower
The wise apothecary's skill
A single drop of lethal power
From perfect sweetness can distill

From bitterness in efflorescence,
With murderous poisons packed therein;
The poet draws pellucid essence
Pure as a drop of metheglin.

Elinor Morton Wylie

Love Song

Lovers eminent in love
Ever diversities combine;
The vocal chords of the cushat-dove,
The snake's articulated spine.

Such elective elements
Educate the eye and lip
With one's refreshing innocence,
The other's claim to scholarship.

The serpent's knowledge of the world
Learn, and the dove's more naïve charm;
Whether your ringlets should be curled,
And why he likes his claret warm.

Elinor Morton Wylie

Madman's Song

Better to see your cheek grown hollow,
Better to see your temple worn,
Than to forget to follow, follow,
After the sound of a silver horn.

Better to bind your brow with willow
And follow, follow until you die,
Than to sleep with your head on a golden pillow,
Nor lift it up when the hunt goes by.

Better to see your cheek grow sallow
And your hair grown gray, so soon, so soon,
Than to forget to hallo, hallo,
After the milk-white hounds of the moon.

Elinor Morton Wylie

Nadir

If we must cheat ourselves with any dream,
Then let it be a dream of nobleness:
Since it is necessary to express
Gall from black grapes--to sew an endless seam
With a rusty needle--chase a spurious gleam
Narrowing to the nothing through the less--
Since life's no better than a bitter guess,
And love's a stranger--let us change the theme.

Let us at least pretend--it may be true--
That we can close our lips on poisonous
Dark wine diluted by the Stygean wave;
And let me dream sublimity in you,
And courage, liberal for the two of us:
Let us at least pretend we can be brave.

Elinor Morton Wylie

Nancy

You are a rose, but set with sharpest spine;
You are a pretty bird that pecks at me;
You are a little squirrel on a tree,
Pelting me with the prickly fruit of the pine;
A diamond, torn from a crystal mine,
Not like that milky treasure of the sea,
A smooth, translucent pearl, but skilfully
Carven to cut, and faceted to shine.

If you are flame, it dances and burns blue;
If you are light, it pierces like a star
Intenser than a needlepoint of ice.
The dextrous touch that shaped the soul of you,
Mingled, to mix, and make you what you are,
Magic between the sugar and the spice.

Elinor Morton Wylie

Now let no charitable hope

Now let no charitable hope
Confuse my mind with images
Of eagle and of antelope:
I am by nature none of these.

I was, being human, born alone;
I am, being woman, hard beset;
I live by squeezing from a stone
What little nourishment I get.

In masks outrageous and austere
The years go by in single file;
But none has merited my fear,
And none has quite escaped my smile.

Elinor Morton Wylie

October

Beauty has a tarnished dress,
And a patchwork cloak of cloth
Dipped deep in mournfulness,
Striped like a moth.

Wet grass where it trails
Dyes it green along the hem;
She has seven silver veils
With cracked bells on them.

She is tired of all these--
Grey gauze, translucent lawn;
The broad cloak of Herakles.
Is tangled flame and fawn.

Water and light are wearing thin:
She has drawn above her head
The warm enormous lion skin
Rough red and gold.

Elinor Morton Wylie

Ophelia

My locks are shorn for sorrow
Of love which may not be;
Tomorrow and tomorrow
Are plotting cruelty.

The winter wind tangles
These ringlets half-grown,
The sun sprays with spangles
And rays like his own.

Oh, quieter and colder
Is the stream; he will wait;
When my curls touch my shoulder
He will comb them straight.

Elinor Morton Wylie

Phases of the Moon

Once upon a time I heard
That the flying moon was a Phoenix bird;
Thus she sails through windy skies,
Thus in the willow's arms she lies;
Turn to the East or turn to the West
In many trees she makes her nest.
When she's but a pearly thread
Look among birch leaves overhead;
When she dies in yellow smoke
Look in a thunder-smitten oak;
But in May when the moon is full,
Bright as water and white as wool,
Look for her where she loves to be,
Asleep in a high magnolia tree.

Elinor Morton Wylie

Poor Earth

It is not heaven: bitter seed
Leavens its entrails with despair
It is a star where dragons breed:
Devils have a footing there.

The sky has bent it out of shape;
The sun has strapped it to his wheel;
Its course is crooked to escape
Traps and gins of stone and steel.

It balances on air, and spins
Snared by strong transparent space;
I forgive it all its sins;
I kiss the scars upon its face.

Elinor Morton Wylie

Pretty Words

Poets make pets of pretty, docile words:
I love smooth words, like gold-enamelled fish
Which circle slowly with a silken swish,
And tender ones, like downy-feathred birds:
Words shy and dappled, deep-eyed deer in herds,
Come to my hand, and playful if I wish,
Or purring softly at a silver dish,
Blue Persian kittens fed on cream and curds.

I love bright words, words up and singing early;
Words that are luminous in the dark, and sing;
Warm lazy words, white cattle under trees;
I love words opalescent, cool, and pearly,
Like midsummer moths, and honied words like bees,
Gilded and sticky, with a little sting.

Elinor Morton Wylie

Primavera in the North

She has danced for leagues and leagues,
Over thorns and thistles,
Prancing to a tune of Griegg's
Performed on willow whistles.

Antelopes behold her, dazed,
Velvet-eyed, and furry;
Polar flowers, crackle-glazed,
Snap beneath her hurry.

In a wig of copper wire,
A gown of scalloped gauzes,
She capers like a flame of fire
Over Arctic mosses.

All her tears have turned to birds,
All her thoughts of dolour
Paint the snow with scarlet words
And traceries of colour.

Elinor Morton Wylie

Prophecy

I shall die hidden in a hut
In the middle of an alder wood,
With the back door blind and bolted shut,
And the front door locked for good.

I shall lie folded like a saint,
Lapped in a scented linen sheet,
On a bedstead striped with bright-blue paint,
Narrow and cold and neat.

The midnight will be glassy black
Behind the panes, with wind about
To set his mouth against a crack
And blow the candle out.

Elinor Morton Wylie

Quarrel

Let us quarrel for these reasons:
You detest the salt which seasons
My speech . . . and all my lights go out
In the cold poison of your doubt.
I love Shelley . . . you love Keats
Something parts and something meets.
I love salads . . . you love chops;
Something goes and something stops.
Something hides its face and cries;
Something shivers; something dies.
I love blue ribbons brought from fairs;
You love sitting splitting hairs.
I love truth, and so do you . . .
Tell me, is it truly true?

Elinor Morton Wylie

Sanctuary

This is the bricklayer; hear the thud
Of his heavy load dumped down on stone.
His lustrous bricks are brighter than blood,
His smoking mortar whiter than bone.

Set each sharp-edged, fire-bitten brick
Straight by the plumb-line's shivering length;
Make my marvelous wall so thick
Dead nor living may shake its strength.

Full as a crystal cup with drink
Is my cell with dreams, and quiet, and cool. . . .
Stop, old man! You must leave a chink;
How can I breathe? You can't, you fool!

Elinor Morton Wylie

Sea Lullaby

The old moon is tarnished
With smoke of the flood,
The dead leaves are varnished
With colour like blood.

A treacherous smiler
With teeth white as milk,
A savage beguiler
In sheathings of silk

The sea creeps to pillage,
She leaps on her prey;
A child of the village
Was murdered today.

She came up to meet him
In a smooth golden cloak,
She choked him and beat him
to death, for a joke.

Her bright locks were tangled,
She shouted for joy
With one hand she strangled
A strong little boy.

Now in silence she lingers
Beside him all night
To wash her long fingers
In silvery light.

Elinor Morton Wylie

Silver Filigree

The icicles wreathing
On trees in festoon
Swing, swayed to our breathing:
They're made of the moon.

She's a pale, waxen taper;
And these seem to drip
Transparent as paper
From the flame of her tip.

Molten, smoking a little,
Into crystal they pass;
Falling, freezing, to brittle
And delicate glass.

Each a sharp-pointed flower,
Each a brief stalactite
Which hangs for an hour
In the blue cave of night.

Elinor Morton Wylie

Spring Pastoral

Liza, go steep your long white hands
In the cool waters of that spring
Which bubbles up through shiny sands
The colour of a wild-dove's wing.

Dabble your hands, and steep them well
Until those nails are pearly white
Now rosier than a laurel bell;
Then come to me at candlelight.

Lay your cold hands across my brows,
And I shall sleep, and I shall dream
Of silver-pointed willow boughs
Dipping their fingers in a stream.

Elinor Morton Wylie

Sunset on the Spire

All that I dream
By day or night
Lives in that stream
Of lovely light.
Here is the earth,
And there is the spire;
This is my hearth,
And that is my fire.
From the sun's dome
I am shouted proof
That this is my home,
And that is my roof.
Here is my food,
And here is my drink,
And I am wooed
From the moon's brink.
And the days go over,
And the nights end;
Here is my lover,
Here is my friend.
All that I
Can ever ask
Wears that sky
Like a thin gold mask.

Elinor Morton Wylie

The Child on the Curbstone

The headlights raced; the moon, death-faced,
Stared down on that golden river.
I saw through the smoke the scarlet cloak
Of a boy who could not shiver.

His father's hand forced him to stand,
The traffic thundered slaughter;
One foot he thrust in the whirling dust
As it were running water.

As in a dream I saw the stream
Scatter in drops that glistened;
They flamed, they flashed, his brow they splashed,
And danger's son was christened.

The portent passed; his fate was cast,
Sea-farer, desert-ranger.
Tearless I smiled on that fearless child
Dipping his foot in Danger.

Elinor Morton Wylie

The Church-Bell

As I was lying in my bed
I heard the church-bell ring;
Before one solemn word was said
A bird began to sing.

I heard a dog begin to bark
And a bold crowing cock;
The bell, between the cold and dark,
Tolled. It was five o'clock.

The church-bell tolled, and the bird sang,
A clear true voice he had;
The cock crew, and the church-bell rang,
I knew it had gone mad.

A hand reached down from the dark skies,
It took the bell-rope thong,
The bell cried "Look! Lift up your eyes!"
The clapper shook to song.

The iron clapper laughed aloud,
Like clashing wind and wave;
The bell cried out "Be strong and proud!"
Then, with a shout, "Be brave!"

The rumbling of the market-carts,
The pounding of men's feet
Were drowned in song; "Lift up your hearts!"
The song was loud and sweet.

Slow and slow the great bell swung,
It hung in the steeple mute;
And people tore its living tongue
Out by the very root.

Elinor Morton Wylie

The Crooked Stick

First Traveller: What's that lying in the dust?
Second Traveller: A crooked stick.
First Traveller: What's it worth, if you can trust to arithmetic?
Second Traveller: Isn't this a riddle?
First Traveller: No, a trick.
Second Traveller:It's worthless, leave it where it lies.
First Traveller: Wait; count ten;
Rub a little dust upon your eyes;
Now, look again.
Second Traveller: Well, and what the devil is it, then?
First Traveller: It's the sort of crooked stick that shepherds know.
Second Traveller: Someone's loss!
First Traveller: Bend it, and you make of it a bow.
Break it, a cross.
Second Traveller: But it's all grown over with moss!

Elinor Morton Wylie

The Eagle and the Mole

Avoid the reeking herd,
Shun the polluted flock,
Live like that stoic bird,
The eagle of the rock.

The huddled warmth of crowds
Begets and fosters hate;
He keeps above the clouds
His cliff inviolate.

When flocks are folded warm,
And herds to shelter run,
He sails above the storm,
He stares into the sun.

If in the eagle's track
Your sinews cannot leap,
Avoid the lathered pack,
Turn from the steaming sheep.

If you would keep your soul
From spotted sight or sound,
Live like the velvet mole:
Go burrow underground.

And there hold intercourse
With roots of trees and stones,
With rivers at their source,
And disembodied bones.

Elinor Morton Wylie

The Fairy Goldsmith

Here's a wonderful thing,
A humming-bird's wing
In hammered gold,
And store well chosen
Of snowflakes frozen
In crystal cold.

Black onyx cherries
And mistletoe berries
Of chrysoprase,
Jade buds, tight shut,
All carven and cut
In intricate ways.

Here, if you please
Are little gilt bees
In amber drops
Which look like honey,
Translucent and sunny,
From clover-tops.

Here's an elfin girl
Of mother-of-pearl
And moonshine made,
With tortise-shell hair
Both dusky and fair
In its light and shade.

Here's lacquer laid thin,
Like a scarlet skin
On an ivory fruit;
And a filigree frost
Of frail notes lost
From a fairy lute.

Here's a turquoise chain
Of sun-shower rain
To wear if you wish;
And glittering green
With aquamarine,
A silvery fish.

Here are pearls all strung
On a thread among
Pretty pink shells;
And bubbles blown
From the opal stone
Which ring like bells.

Touch them and take them,
But do not break them!
Beneath your hand

They will wither like foam
If you carry them home
Out of fairy-lannd.

O, they never can last
Though you hide them fast
From moth and from rust;
In your monstrous day
They will crumble away
Into quicksilver dust.

Elinor Morton Wylie

The Falcon

Why should my sleepy heart be taught
To whistle mocking-bird replies?
This is another bird you've caught,
Soft-feathered, with a falcon's eyes.

The bird Imagination,
That flies so far, that dies so soon;
Her wings are coloured like the sun,
Her breast is coloured like the moon.

Weave her a chain of silver twist,
And a little hood of scarlet wool,
And let her perch upon your wrist,
And tell her she is beautiful.

Elinor Morton Wylie

The Lion and the Lamb

I saw a Tiger's golden flank,
I saw what food he ate,
By a desert spring he drank;
The Tiger's name was Hate.

Then I saw a placid Lamb
Lying fast asleep;
Like a river from its dam
Flashed the Tiger's leap.

I saw a lion tawny-red,
Terrible and brave;
The Tiger's leap overhead
Broke like a wave.

In sand below or sun above
He faded like a flame.
The Lamb said, "I am Love;
Lion, tell your name."

The Lion's voice thundering
Shook his vaulted breast,
"I am Love. By this spring,
Brother, let us rest."

Elinor Morton Wylie

The Lost Path

The garden's full of scented wallflowers,
And, save that these stir faintly, nothing stirs;
Only a distant bell in hollow chime
Cried out just now for far-forgoten time,
And three reverberate words the great bell spoke.
The knocker's made of brass, the door of oak,
And such a clamor must be loosed on air
By the knocker's blow that knock I do not dare.
The silence is a spell, and if it break,
What things, that now lie sleeping, will awake?

Are simple creatures lying there in cool
Sweet linen sheets, in slumber like the pool
Of moonlight white as water on the floor?
Will they come down laughing and unlock the door?
And will they draw me in, and let me sit
On the tall settle while the lamp is lit?
And shall I see their innocent clean lives
Shining as plainly as the plates and knives,
The blue bowls, and the brass cage with its bird?

But listen! listen! surely something stirred
Within the house, and creeping down the halls
Draws close to me with sinister footfalls.
Will long pale fingers softly lift the latch,
And lead me up, under the osier thatch,
To a little room, a little secret room,
Hung with green arras picturing the doom,
The most disasterous death of some proud knight?
And shall I search the room by candle-light
And see, behind the curtains of my bed,
A murdered man who sleeps as sleep the dead?

Or will my clamorous knocking shake the trees
With lonely thunder through the stillnesses,
And then lie down--the coldest fear of all--
To nothing, and deliberate silence fall
On the house deep in the silence, and no one come
To door or window, staring blind and dumb?

Elinor Morton Wylie

The Pekingese

For a picture

This Pekingese, that makes the sand-grains spin,
Is digging little tunnels to Pekin:
Dream him emerging in a porcelain cave
Where wounded dragons stain a pearly wave.

Elinor Morton Wylie

The Poor Old Cannon

Upbroke the sun
In red-gold foam;
Thus spoke the gun
At the Soldier's Home:

"Whenever I hear
Blue thunder speak
My voice sounds clear
But little and weak.

"And when the proud
Young cockerels crow
My voice sounds loud,
But gentle and low.

"When the mocking-bird
Prolongs his note
I cannot be heard
Though I split my throat."

Elinor Morton Wylie

The Prinkin' Leddie

The Hielan' lassies are a' for spinnin',
The Lowlan' lassies for prinkin' and pinnin';
My daddie w'u'd chide me, an' so w'u'd my minnie
If I s'u'd bring hame sic a prinkin' leddie.

Now haud your tongue, ye haverin' coward,
For whilst I'm young I'll go flounced an' flowered,
In lutestring striped like the strings o' a fiddle,
Wi' gowden girdles aboot my middle.

In your Hielan' glen, where the rain pours steady,
Ye'll be gay an' glad for a prinkin' leddie;
Where the rocks are all bare an' the turf is all sodden,
An' lassies gae sad in their homespun an' hodden.

My silks are stiff wi' patterns o' siller,
I've an ermine hood like the hat o' a miller,
I've chains o' coral like rowan berries,
An' a cramoisie mantle that cam' frae Paris.

Ye'll be glad for the glint o' its scarlet linin'
When the larks are up an' the sun is shinin';
When the winds are up an' ower the heather
Your heart'll be gay wi' my gowden feather.

When the skies are low an' the earth is frozen,
Ye'll be gay an' glad for the leddie ye've chosen,
When ower the snow I go prinkin' an' prancin'
In my wee red slippers were made for dancin'.

It's better a leddie like Solomon's lily
Than one that'll run like a Hielan' gillie
A-linkin' it ower the leas, my laddie,
In a raggedy kilt an' a belted pladdie!

Elinor Morton Wylie

The Puritan's Ballad

My love came up from Barnegat,
The sea was in his eyes;
He trod as softly as a cat
And told me terrible lies.

His hair was yellow as new-cut pine
In shavings curled and feathered;
I thought how silver it would shine
By cruel winters weathered.

But he was in his twentieth year,
Ths time I'm speaking of;
We were head over heels in love with fear
And half a-feared of love.

My hair was piled in a copper crown --
A devilish living thing --
And the tortise-shell pins fell down, fell down,
When that snake uncoiled to spring.

His feet were used to treading a gale
And balancing thereon;
His face was as brown as a foreign sail
Threadbare against the sun.

His arms were thick as hickory logs
Whittled to little wrists;
Strong as the teeth of a terrier dog
Were the fingers of his fists.

Within his arms I feared to sink
Where lions shook their manes,
And dragons drawn in azure ink
Lept quickened by his veins.

Dreadful his strength and length of limb
As the sea to foundering ships;
I dipped my hands in love for him
No deeper than the tips.

But our palms were welded by a flame
The moment we came to part,
And on his knuckles I read my name
Enscrolled with a heart.

And something made our wills to bend,
As wild as trees blown over;
We were no longer friend and friend,
But only lover and lover.

"In seven weeks or seventy years --
God grant it may be sooner! --

I'll make a hankerchief for you
From the sails of my captain's schooner.

We'll wear our loves like wedding rings
Long polished to our touch;
We shall be busy with other things
And they cannot bother us much.

When you are skimming the wrinkled cream
And your ring clinks on the pan,
You'll say to yourself in a pensive dream,
'How wonderful a man!'

When I am slitting a fish's head
And my ring clanks on the knife,
I'll say with thanks as a prayer is said,
'How beautiful a wife!'

And I shall fold my decorous paws
In velvet smooth and deep,
Like a kitten that covers up its claws
To sleep and sleep and sleep.

Like a little blue pigeon you shall bow
Your bright alarming crest;
In the crook of my arm you'll lay your brow
To rest and rest and rest.

Will he never come back from Barnegat
With thunder in his eyes,
Treading as soft as a tiger cat,
To tell me terrible lies?

Elinor Morton Wylie

The Tortoise in Eternity

Within my house of patterned horn
I sleep in such a bed
As men may keep before they're born
And after when they're dead.

Sticks and stones may break their bones,
And words may make them bleed;
There is not one of them who owns
An armour to his need.

Tougher than hide or lozenged bark,
Snow-storm and thunder proof,
And quick with sun, and thick with dark,
Is this my darling roof.

Men's troubled dreams of death and birth
Puls mother-o'-pearl to black;
I bear the rainbow bubble Earth
Square on my scornful back.

Elinor Morton Wylie

Valentine

Too high, too high to pluck
My heart shall swing.
A fruit no bee shall suck,
No wasp shall sting.

If on some night of cold
It falls to ground
In apple-leaves of gold
I'll wrap it round.

And I shall seal it up
With spice and salt,
In a carven silver cup,
In a deep vault.

Before my eyes are blind
And my lips mute,
I must eat core and rind
Of that same fruit.

Before my heart is dust
By the end of all,
Eat it I must, I must
Were it bitter gall.

But I shall keep it sweet
By some strange art;
Wild honey I shall eat
When I eat my heart.

O honey cool and chaste
As clover's breath!
Sweet Heaven I shall taste
Before my death.

Elinor Morton Wylie

Velvet Shoes

Let us walk in the white snow
In a soundless space;
With footsteps quiet snd slow,
At a tranquil pace,
Under veils of white lace.

I shall go shod in silk,
And you in wool,
White as white cow's milk,
More beautiful
Than the breast of a gull.

We shall walk through the still town
In a windless peace;
We shall step upon white down,
Upon silver fleece,
Upon softer than these.

We shall walk in velvet shoes:
Wherever we go
Silence will fall like dews
On white silence below.
We shall walk in the snow.

Elinor Morton Wylie

Venetian Interior

Allegra, rising from her canopied dreams,
Slides both white feet across the slanted beams
Which lace the peacock jalousies: behold
An idol of fine clay, with feet of gold

Elinor Morton Wylie

Village Mystery

The woman in the pointed hood
And cloak blue-gray like a pigeon's wing,
Whose orchard climbs to the balsam-wood,
Has done a cruel thing.

To her back door-step came a ghost,
A girl who had been ten years dead,
She stood by the granite hitching-post
And begged for a piece of bread.

Now why should I, who walk alone,
Who am ironical and proud,
Turn, when a woman casts a stone
At a beggar in a shroud?

I saw the dead girl cringe and whine,
And cower in the weeping air--
But, oh, she was no kin of mine,
And so I did not care!

Elinor Morton Wylie

Wild Peaches

1

When the world turns completely upside down
You say we'll emigrate to the Eastern Shore
Aboard a river-boat from Baltimore;
We'll live among wild peach trees, miles from town,
You'll wear a coonskin cap, and I a gown
Homespun, dyed butternut's dark gold colour.
Lost, like your lotus-eating ancestor,
We'll swim in milk and honey till we drown.

The winter will be short, the summer long,
The autumn amber-hued, sunny and hot,
Tasting of cider and of scuppernong;
All seasons sweet, but autumn best of all.
The squirrels in their silver fur will fall
Like falling leaves, like fruit, before your shot.

2

The autumn frosts will lie upon the grass
Like bloom on grapes of purple-brown and gold.
The misted early mornings will be cold;
The little puddles will be roofed with glass.
The sun, which burns from copper into brass,
Melts these at noon, and makes the boys unfold
Their knitted mufflers; full as they can hold
Fat pockets dribble chestnuts as they pass.

Peaches grow wild, and pigs can live in clover;
A barrel of salted herrings lasts a year;
The spring begins before the winter's over.
By February you may find the skins
Of garter snakes and water moccasins
Dwindled and harsh, dead-white and cloudy-clear.

3

When April pours the colours of a shell
Upon the hills, when every little creek
Is shot with silver from the Chesapeake
In shoals new-minted by the ocean swell,
When strawberries go begging, and the sleek
Blue plums lie open to the blackbird's beak,
We shall live well -- we shall live very well.

The months between the cherries and the peaches
Are brimming cornucopias which spill
Fruits red and purple, sombre-bloomed and black;
Then, down rich fields and frosty river beaches
We'll trample bright persimmons, while you kill
Bronze partridge, speckled quail, and canvasback.

4

Down to the Puritan marrow of my bones
There's something in this richness that I hate.
I love the look, austere, immaculate,
Of landscapes drawn in pearly monotones.
There's something in my very blood that owns
Bare hills, cold silver on a sky of slate,
A thread of water, churned to milky spate
Streaming through slanted pastures fenced with stones.

I love those skies, thin blue or snowy gray,
Those fields sparse-planted, rendering meagre sheaves;
That spring, briefer than apple-blossom's breath,
Summer, so much too beautiful to stay,
Swift autumn, like a bonfire of leaves,
And sleepy winter, like the sleep of death.

Elinor Morton Wylie

Winter Sleep

When against earth a wooden heel
Clicks as loud as stone on steel,
When stone turns flour instead of flakes,
And frost bakes clay as fire bakes,
When the hard-bitten fields at last
Crack like iron flawed in the cast,
When the world is wicked and cross and old,
I long to be quit of the cruel cold.

Little birds like bubbles of glass
Fly to other Americas,
Birds as bright as sparkles of wine
Fly in the nite to the Argentine,
Birds of azure and flame-birds go
To the tropical Gulf of Mexico:
They chase the sun, they follow the heat,
It is sweet in their bones, O sweet, sweet, sweet!
It's not with them that I'd love to be,
But under the roots of the balsam tree.

Just as the spiniest chestnut-burr
Is lined within with the finest fur,
So the stoney-walled, snow-roofed house
Of every squirrel and mole and mouse
Is lined with thistledown, sea-gull's feather,
Velvet mullein-leaf, heaped together
With balsam and juniper, dry and curled,
Sweeter than anything else in the world.

O what a warm and darksome nest
Where the wildest things are hidden to rest!
It's there that I'd love to lie and sleep,
Soft, soft, soft, and deep, deep, deep!

Elinor Morton Wylie