

Classic Poetry Series

Emily Holmes Coleman

- poems -

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Emily Holmes Coleman (January 22, 1899- June 13, 1974)

Emily Coleman (1899-1974) was an American born writer, and a lifelong compulsive diary keeper. She also wrote a single novel, *The Shutter of Snow* (1930), published under the name Emily Holmes Coleman.

Biography

Coleman was born January 22, 1899, in Oakland, California. She graduated from Wellesley College in 1920, and in 1921 married psychologist Loyd Ring Coleman. In 1926 Emily Coleman, with her son John, arrived in Paris where she worked as the society editor for the *Paris Tribune* (the European edition of the *Chicago Tribune*). While in Paris Coleman contributed articles, stories, and poems to *Transition* and became acquainted with others who wrote for the magazine. Coleman also worked for one year as Emma Goldman's secretary. She assisted at St. Tropez, during the period in which Goldman was writing her autobiography, *Living My Life* (1931). As an expatriate writer, Coleman continued to live in Europe during the 1930s and 1940s.

Although Emily Coleman's papers reveal her to be a prolific writer, her only published works were her contributions to little magazines, such as *Transition* and *New Review*, and her autobiographical novel, *The Shutter of Snow* (1930). Based on her experiences as a victim of postpartum psychosis after the birth of her son, *Shutter of Snow* fictionalized her experiences as a patient in a mental hospital. Reviewers praised the novel as authentic and vivid.

Coleman's other writings also draw upon her personal experiences, particularly her strong religious beliefs. Following her conversion to Catholicism in 1944, Coleman's stories, poetry, and diary entries focused almost exclusively on her Catholic faith, which has been described as "mystical" and "fanatical."

Coleman's papers also reflect other elements of her life, for example her marriage (1940-1944) to Arizona rancher Jake Scarborough, the disavowal of this marriage following her Catholic conversion, her relationships to her son, grandchildren, and a diverse collection of friends. One particular group of friends in England, sometimes referred to as the "Hayford Hall Circle," is documented in her correspondence and diaries. Among this group were writers Djuna Barnes, John Holms, and Edwin Muir, as well as Peggy Guggenheim, Beatrix Wright, Antonia White, and others.

From 1944 until her death the focus of Coleman's attention and activities was her religious life. She became involved with the Catholic left, developed friendships with Dorothy Day and Jacques and Raissa Maritain, and lived in a

number of Catholic communities. At the time of her death on June 13, 1974, Coleman was being cared for by Catholic nuns at The Farm in Tivoli, New York.

The Liberator

Keys turning
rattling in the loose locks
 opening high the doors
that close again
like death-hours coming faster

the walls are white
and the line of beds is staring
all the bars go up and down
and none of them lead outward

and leaping eyes
 and stiff limbs
follow the crunch of the keys

I am powerful now
and I will break those that carry the keys
 with little hammers
small hammers
 which you will make for me
 and hide in the porridge
I will break all their heads
 and lay them in neat rows
 and we shall wave high the keys
 and open wide a million doors
and all of us shall dance in the snow
and that poor woman in the spiral casket
shall warm a wooden doll to her dress
 and lean her hair in the fire

the grating shall be taken from about the fire
 and the woman and the keys shall go within
 all of us
 shall
 dance
 within

Emily Holmes Coleman