

Classic Poetry Series

James Stephens

- poems -

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Hate

My enemy came nigh,
And I
Stared fiercely in his face.
My lips went writhing back in a grimace,
And stern I watched him with a narrow eye.
Then, as I turned away, my enemy,
That bitter heart and savage, said to me:
"Some day, when this is past,
When all the arrows that we have are cast,
We may ask one another why we hate,
And fail to find a story to relate.
It may seem then to us a mystery
That we should hate each other."

Thus said he,
And did not turn away,
Waiting to hear what I might have to say,
But I fled quickly, fearing had I stayed
I might have kissed him as I would a maid.

James Stephens

I heard a bird at dawn

I heard a bird at dawn
Singing sweetly on a tree,
That the dew was on the lawn,
And the wind was on the lea;
But I didn't listen to him,
For he didn't sing to me.

I didn't listen to him,
For he didn't sing to me
That the dew was on the lawn
And the wind was on the lea;
I was singing at the time
Just as prettily as he.

I was singing all the time,
Just as prettily as he,
About the dew upon the lawn
And the wind upon the lea;
So I didn't listen to him
As he sang upon a tree.

James Stephens

In The Cool Of The Evening

I thought I heard Him calling. Did you hear
A sound, a little sound? My curious ear
Is dinned with flying noises, and the tree
Goes -- whisper, whisper, whisper silently
Till all its whispers spread into the sound
Of a dull roar. Lie closer to the ground,
The shade is deep and He may pass us by.
We are so very small, and His great eye,
Customed to starry majesties, may gaze
Too wide to spy us hiding in the maze;
Ah, misery! the sun has not yet gone
And we are naked: He will look upon
Our crouching shame, may make us stand upright
Burning in terror -- O that it were night!
He may not come . . . what! listen, list now --
He is here! lie closer . . . Adam, where art thou?

James Stephens

In The Poppy Field

Mad Patsy said, he said to me,
That every morning he could see
An angel walking on the sky;
Across the sunny skies of morn
He threw great handfuls far and nigh
Of poppy seed among the corn;
And then, he said, the angels run
To see the poppies in the sun.

A poppy is a devil weed,
I said to him - he disagreed;
He said the devil had no hand
In spreading flowers tall and fair
Through corn and rye and meadow land,
by garth and barrow everywhere:
The devil has not any flower,
But only money in his power.

And then he stretched out in the sun
And rolled upon his back for fun:
He kicked his legs and roared for joy
Because the sun was shining down:
He said he was a little boy
And would not work for any clown:
He ran and laughed behind a bee,
And danced for very ecstasy.

James Stephens

The Ancient Elf

I am the maker,
The builder, the breaker,
The eagle-winged helper,
The speedy forsaker!

The lance and the lyre,
The water, the fire,
The tooth of oppression,
The lip of desire!

The snare and the wing,
The honey, the sting!
When you seek for me--look
For a different thing!

I, careless and gay,
Never mean what I say,
For my thoughts and my eyes
Look the opposite way!

James Stephens

The Goat's Path

Hi There! I see you're enjoying the site, and just wanted to extend an invitation to register for our free site. The members of oldpoetry strive to make this a fun place to learn and share - hope you join us! - Kevin

James Stephens

The Lonely God

So Eden was deserted, and at eve
Into the quiet place God came to grieve.
His face was sad, His hands hung slackly down
Along his robe; too sorrowful to frown
He paced along the grassy paths and through
The silent trees, and where the flowers grew
Tended by Adam. All the birds had gone
Out to the world, and singing was not one
To cheer the lonely God out of His grief --
The silence broken only when a leaf
Tapt lightly on a leaf, or when the wind,
Slow-handed, swayed the bushes to its mind.

And so along the base of a round hill,
Rolling in fern, He bent His way until
He neared the little hut which Adam made,
And saw its dusky rooftree overlaid
With greenest leaves. Here Adam and his spouse
Were wont to nestle in their little house
Snug at the dew-time: here He, standing sad,
Sighed with the wind, nor any pleasure had
In heavenly knowledge, for His darlings twain
Had gone from Him to learn the feel of pain,
And what was meant by sorrow and despair, --
Drear knowledge for a Father to prepare.

There he looked sadly on the little place;
A beehive round it was, without a trace
Of occupant or owner; standing dim
Among the gloomy trees it seemed to Him
A final desolation, the last word
Wherewith the lips of silence had been stirred.
Chaste and remote, so tiny and so shy,
So new withal, so lost to any eye,
So pac't of memories all innocent
Of days and nights that in it had been spent
In blithe communion, Adam, Eve, and He,
Afar from Heaven and its gaudery;
And now no more! He still must be the God
But not the friend; a Father with a rod
Whose voice was fear, whose countenance a threat,
Whose coming terror, and whose going wet
With penitential tears; not evermore
Would they run forth to meet Him as before
With careless laughter, striving each to be
First to His hand and dancing in their glee
To see Him coming -- they would hide instead
At His approach, or stand and hang the head,
Speaking in whispers, and would learn to pray
Instead of asking, 'Father, if we may.'

Never again to Eden would He haste

At cool of evening, when the sun had paced
Back from the tree-tops, slanting from the rim
Of a low cloud, what time the twilight dim
Knit tree to tree in shadow, gathering slow
Till all had met and vanished in the flow
Of dusky silence, and a brooding star
Stared at the growing darkness from afar,
While haply now and then some nested bird
Would lift upon the air a sleepy word
Most musical, or swing its airy bed
To the high moon that drifted overhead.

'Twas good to quit at evening His great throne,
To lay His crown aside, and all alone
Down through the quiet air to stoop and glide
Unkenned by angels: silently to hide
In the green fields, by dappled shades, where brooks
Through leafy solitudes and quiet nooks
Flowed far from heavenly majesty and pride,
From light astounding and the wheeling tide
Of roaring stars. Thus does it ever seem
Good to the best to stay aside and dream
In narrow places, where the hand can feel
Something beside, and know that it is real.
His angels! silly creatures who could sing
And sing again, and delicately fling
The smoky censer, bow and stand aside
All mute in adoration: thronging wide,
Till nowhere could He look but soon He saw
An angel bending humbly to the law
Mechanic; knowing nothing more of pain,
Than when they were forbid to sing again,
Or swing anew the censer, or bow down
In humble adoration of His frown.
This was the thought in Eden as He trod --
. . . It is a lonely thing to be a God.

So long! afar through Time He bent His mind,
For the beginning, which He could not find,
Through endless centuries and backwards still
Endless forever, till His 'stonied will
Halted in circles, dizzied in the swing
Of mazy nothingness. -- His mind could bring
Not to subjection, grip or hold the theme
Whose wide horizon melted like a dream
To thinnest edges. Infinite behind
The piling centuries were trodden blind
In gulfs chaotic -- so He could not see
When He was not who always had To Be.

Not even godly fortitude can stare
Into Eternity, nor easy bear

The insolent vacuity of Time:

It is too much, the mind can never climb
Up to its meaning, for, without an end,
Without beginning, plan, or scope, or trend
To point a path, there nothing is to hold
And steady surmise: so the mind is rolled
And swayed and drowned in dull Immensity.
Eternity outfaces even Me
With its indifference, and the fruitless year
Would swing as fruitless were I never there.

And so for ever, day and night the same,
Years flying swiftly nowhere, like a game
Played random by a madman, without end
Or any reasoned object but to spend
What is unspendable -- Eternal Woe!
O Weariness of Time that fast or slow
Goes never further, never has in view
An ending to the thing it seeks to do,
And so does nothing: merely ebb and flow,
From nowhere into nowhere, touching so
The shores of many stars and passing on,
Careless of what may come or what has gone.

O solitude unspeakable! to be
For ever with oneself! never see
An equal face, or feel an equal hand,
To sit in state and issue reprimand,
Admonishment or glory, and to smile
Disdaining what has happened the while!
O to be breast to breast against a foe!
Against a friend! to strive and not to know
The laboured outcome: love nor be aware
How much the other loved, and greatly care
With passion for that happy love or hate,
Nor know what joy or dole was hid in fate.
For I have ranged the spacy width and gone
Swift north and south, striving to look upon
An ending somewhere. Many days I sped
Hard to the west, a thousand years I fled
Eastwards in fury, but I could not find
The fringes of the Infinite. Behind
And yet behind, and ever at the end
Came new beginnings, paths that did not wend
To anywhere were there: and ever vast
And vaster spaces opened -- till at last
Dizzied with distance, thrilling to a pain
Unnameable, I turned to Heaven again.
And there My angels were prepared to fling
The cloudy incense, there prepared to sing
My praise and glory -- O, in fury I
Then roared them senseless, then threw down the sky

And stamped upon it, buffeted a star
With my great fist, and flung the sun afar:
Shouted My anger till the mighty sound
Rung to the width, frightening the furthest bound
And scope of hearing: tumult vaster still,
Throning the echo, dinning My ears, until
I fled in silence, seeking out a place
To hide Me from the very thought of Space.

And so, He thought, in Mine own Image I
Have made a man, remote from Heaven high
And all its humble angels: I have poured
My essence in his nostrils: I have cored
His heart with My own spirit; part of Me,
His mind with laboured growth unceasingly
Must strive to equal Mine; must ever grow
By virtue of My essence till he know
Both good and evil through the solemn test
Of sin and retribution, till, with zest,
He feels his godhead, soars to challenge Me
In Mine own Heaven for supremacy.

Through savage beasts and still more savage clay,
Invincible, I bid him fight a way
To greater battles, crawling through defeat
Into defeat again: ordained to meet
Disaster in disaster; prone to fall,
I prick him with My memory to call
Defiance at his victor and arise
With anguished fury to his greater size
Through tribulation, terror, and despair.
Astounded, he must fight to higher air,
Climb battle into battle till he be
Confronted with a flaming sword and Me.

So growing age by age to greater strength,
To greater beauty, skill and deep intent:
With wisdom wrung from pain, with energy
Nourished in sin and sorrow, he will be
Strong, pure and proud an enemy to meet,
Tremendous on a battle-field, or sweet
To walk by as friend with candid mind.
--Dear enemy or friend so hard to find,
I yet shall find you, yet shall put My breast
In enmity or love against your breast:
Shall smite or clasp with equal ecstasy
The enemy or friend who grows to Me.

The topmost blossom of his growing I
Shall take unto Me, cherish and lift high
Beside myself upon My holy throne: --
It is not good for God to be alone.

The perfect woman of his perfect race
Shall sit beside Me in the highest place
And be my Goddess, Queen, Companion, Wife,
The rounder of My majesty, the life
Of My ambition. She will smile to see
Me bending down to worship at her knee
Who never bent before, and she will say,
'Dear God, who was it taught Thee how to pray?'

And through eternity, adown the slope
Of never-ending time, compact of hope,
Of zest and young enjoyment, I and She
Will walk together, sowing jollity
Among the raving stars, and laughter through
The vacancies of Heaven, till the blue
Vast amplitudes of space lift up a song,
The echo of our presence, rolled along
And ever rolling where the planets sing
The majesty and glory of the King.
Then conquered, thou, Eternity, shalt lie
Under My hand as little as a fly.

I am the Master: I the mighty God
And you My workshop. Your pavilions trod
By Me and Mine shall never cease to be,
For you are but the magnitude of Me,
The width of My extension, the surround
Of My dense splendour. Rolling, rolling round,
To steeped infinity, and out beyond
My own strong comprehension, you are bond
And servile to My doings. Let you swing
More wide and ever wide, you do but fling
Around the instant Me, and measure still
The breadth and proportion of My Will.

Then stooping to the hut -- a beehive round --
God entered in and saw upon the ground
The dusty garland, Adam, (learned to weave)
Had loving placed upon the head of Eve
Before the terror came, when joyous they
Could look for God at closing of the day
Profound and happy. So the Mighty Guest
Rent, took, and placed the blossoms in His breast.
'This,' said He gently, 'I shall show My queen
When she hath grown to Me in space serene,
And say "'twas worn by Eve.'" So, smiling fair,
He spread abroad His wings upon the air.

James Stephens