

Classic Poetry Series

John Shaw Neilson

- poems -

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A Protest and a Protest

A certain old maid at Port Victor
had many strange pets to afflict her,
her Kangaroos fought
with the emu's she caught
and when she protested, they kicked her

John Shaw Neilson

Beauty Imposes

Beauty imposes reverence in the Spring,
Grave as the urge within the honeybuds,
It wounds us as we sing.

Beauty is joy that stays not overlong.
Clad in the magic of sincerities,
It rides up in a song.

Beauty imposes chastenings on the heart,
Grave as the birds in last solemnities
Assembling to depart.

John Shaw Neilson

Love's Calling

QUIETLY as rosebuds
Talk to thin air,
Love came so lightly
I knew not he was there.

Quietly as lovers
Creep at the middle noon,
Softly as players tremble
In the tears of a tune;

Quietly as lilies
Their faint vows declare,
Came the shy pilgrim:
I knew not he was there.

Quietly as tears fall
On a warm sin,
Softly as griefs call
In a violin;

Without hail or tempest,
Blue sword or flame,
Love came so lightly
I knew not that he came.

John Shaw Neilson

May

Shyly the silver-hatted mushrooms make
Soft entrance through,
And undelivered lovers, half awake,
Hear noises in the dew

Yellow in all the earth and in the skies,
The world would seem
Faint as a widow mourning with soft eyes
And falling into dream.

Up the long hill I see the slow plough leave
Furrows of brown;
Dim is the day and beautiful: I grieve
To see the sun go down.

But there are suns a many for mine eyes
Day after day:
Delightsome in grave greenery they rise,
Red oranges in May.

John Shaw Neilson

Native Companions Dancing

On the blue plains in wintry days
The stately birds move in the dance.
Keen eyes have they, and quaint old ways
On the blue plains in wintry days.
The Wind, their unseen Piper, plays,
They strut, salute, retreat, advance;
On the blue plains, in wintry days,
These stately birds move in the dance

John Shaw Neilson

O Heart of Spring

O HEART of Spring!
Spirit of light and love and joyous day,
So soon to faint beneath the fiery Summer:
Still smiles the Earth, eager for thee alway:
Welcome art thou, soever short thy stay,
Thou bold, thou blithe newcomer!
Whither, O whither this thy journeying,
O heart of Spring?

O heart of Spring!
After the stormy days of Winter's reign,
When the keen winds their last lament are sighing,
The Sun shall raise thee up to life again:
In thy dim death thou shalt not suffer pain:
Surely thou dost not fear this quiet dying?
Whither, O whither this thy journeying,
O heart of Spring?

O heart of Spring!
Youth's emblem, ancient and unchanging light,
Uncomprehended, unconsumed, still burning:
Oh that we could, as thou, rise from the night
To find a world of blossoms lilac-white,
And long-winged swallows unafraid returning...
Whither, O whither this thy journeying,
O heart of Spring?

John Shaw Neilson

Schoolgirls Hastening

Fear it has faded and the night:
The bells all peal the hour of nine:
The schoolgirls hastening through the light
Touch the unknowable Divine.

What leavening in my heart would bide!
Full dreams a thousand deep are there:
All luminants succumb beside
The unbound melody of hair.

Joy the long timorous takes the flute:
Valiant with colour songs are born:
Love the impatient absolute
Lives as a Saviour in the morn

Get thou behind me Shadow-Death!
Oh ye Eternities delay!
Morning is with me and the breath
Of schoolgirls hastening down the way.

John Shaw Neilson

Song be Delicate

Let your song be delicate.
The skies declare
No war — the eyes of lovers
Wake everywhere.

Let your voice be delicate.
How faint a thing
Is Love, little Love crying
Under the Spring.

Let your song be delicate.
The flowers can hear:
Too well they know the tremble,
Of the hollow year.

Let your voice be delicate.
The bees are home:
All their day's love is sunken
Safe in the comb.

Let your song be delicate.
Sing no loud hymn:
Death is abroad . . . Oh, the black season!
The deep — the dim!

John Shaw Neilson

The Break of Day

THE STARS are pale.
Old is the Night, his case is grievous,
His strength doth fail.

Through stilly hours
The dews have draped with love's old lavishness
The drowsy flowers.

And Night shall die.
Already, lo! the Morn's first ecstasies
Across the sky.

An evil time is done.
Again, as some one lost in a quaint parable,
Comes up the Sun.

John Shaw Neilson

The Green Singer

ALL singers have shadows
That follow like fears,
But I know a singer
Who never saw tears;
A gay love—a green love—
Delightful—divine:
The Spring is that singer—
An old love of mine!

All players have shadows,
And into the play
Old sorrows will saunter—
Old sorrows will stay.
But here is a player
Whose speech is divine:
The Spring is that player—
An old love of mine!

All singers grow heavy:
Their hours as they run
Bite up all the blossoms,
Suck up all the sun;
But I know a singer
Delightful—divine:
The gay love—the green love—
An old love of mine!

John Shaw Neilson

The Land where I was Born

HAVE you ever been down to my countree
Where the trees are green and tall?
The days are long and the heavens are high,
But the people there are small.
There is no work there; it is always play;
The sun is sweet in the morn;
But a thousand dark things walk at night
In the land where I was born.

Have you ever been down to my countree
Where the birds made happy Spring?
The parrots screamed from the honey-trees,
And the jays hopped chattering.
Strange were the ways of the water-birds
In the brown swamps, night and morn;
I knew the roads they had in the reeds
In the land where I was born.

Have you ever been down to my countree?
Have you ridden the horses there?
They had silver manes, and we made them prance
And plunge and gallop and rear.
We were knights of the olden time,
When the old chain-mail was worn:
The swords would flash and the helmets crash
In the land where I was born.

Have you ever been down to my countree?
It was full of smiling queens:
They had flaxen hair, they were white and fair,
But they never reached their teens.
Their shoes were small and their dreams were tall:
Wonderful frocks were worn;
But the queens all strayed from the place we played,
In the land where I was born.

I know you have been to my countree
Though I never saw you there;
I know you have loved all things I have loved,
Flowery, sweet, and fair.
The days were long,—it was always play;
But we,—we were tired and worn;
They could not welcome us back again
To the land where I was born.

John Shaw Neilson

The Meeting of Sighs

YOUR voice was the rugged
old voice that I knew;
I gave the best grip of
my greeting to you.
I knew not of your lips—
you knew not of mine;
Of travel and travail
we gave not a sign.

We drank and we chorused
with quips in our eyes;
But under our song was
the meeting of sighs.
I knew not of your lips—
you knew not of mine;
For lean years and lone years
had watered the wine.

John Shaw Neilson

The Orange Tree

The young girl stood beside me.
I Saw not what her young eyes could see:
- A light, she said, not of the sky
Lives somewhere in the Orange Tree.

- Is it, I said, of east or west?
The heartbeat of a luminous boy
Who with his faltering flute confessed
Only the edges of his joy?

Was he, I said, borne to the blue
In a mad escapade of Spring
Ere he could make a fond adieu
To his love in the blossoming?

- Listen! the young girl said. There calls
No voice, no music beats on me;
But it is almost sound: it falls
This evening on the Orange Tree.

- Does he, I said, so fear the Spring
Ere the white sap too far can climb?
See in the full gold evening
All happenings of the olden time?

Is he so goaded by the green?
Does the compulsion of the dew
Make him unknowable but keen
Asking with beauty of the blue?

- Listen! the young girl said. For all
Your hapless talk you fail to see
There is a light, a step, a call
This evening on the Orange Tree.

- Is it, I said, a waste of love
Imperishably old in pain,
Moving as an affrighted dove
Under the sunlight or the rain?

Is it a fluttering heart that gave
Too willingly and was reviled?
Is it the stammering at a grave,
The last word of a little child?

- Silence! the young girl said. Oh, why,
Why will you talk to weary me?
Plague me no longer now, for I
Am listening like the Orange Tree.

John Shaw Neilson

The Poor, Poor Country

Oh 'twas a poor country, in Autumn it was bare,
The only green was the cutting grass and the sheep found little there.
Oh, the thin wheat and the brown oats were never two foot high,
But down in the poor country no pauper was I.

My wealth it was the glow that lives forever in the young,
'Twas on the brown water, in the green leaves it hung.
The blue cranes fed their young all day - how far in a tall tree!
And the poor, poor country made no pauper of me.

I waded out to the swan's nest - at night I heard them sing,
I stood amazed at the Pelican, and crowned him for a king;
I saw the black duck in the reeds, and the spoonbill on the sky,
And in that poor country no pauper was I.

The mountain-ducks down in the dark made many a hollow sound,
I saw in sleep the Bunyip creep from the waters underground.
I found the plovers' island home, and they fought right valiantly,
Poor was the country, but it made no pauper of me.

My riches all went into dreams that never yet came home,
They touched upon the wild cherries and the slabs of honeycomb,
They were not of the desolate brood that men can sell or buy,
Down in that poor country no pauper was I.

* * * * *

The New Year came with heat and thirst and the little lakes were low,
The blue cranes were my nearest friends and I mourned to see them go;
I watched their wings so long until I only saw the sky,
Down in that poor country no pauper was I.

John Shaw Neilson

The Smoker Parrot

He has the full moon on his breast,
The moonbeams are about his wing;
He has the colours of a king.
I see him floating unto rest
When all eyes wearily go west,
And the warm winds are quieting.
The moonbeams are about his wing:
He has the full moon on his breast.

John Shaw Neilson

You and Yellow Air

YOU, AND YELLOW AIR by John Shaw Neilson

I dream of an old kissing-time
And the flowered follies there;
In the dim place of cherry-trees,
Of you, and yellow air.

It was an age of babbling,
When the players would play
Mad with the wine and miracles
Of a charmed holiday.

Bewildered was the warm earth
With whistling and sighs,
And a young foal spoke all his heart
With diamonds for eyes.

You were of Love's own colour
In eyes and heart and hair;
In the dim place of cherry-trees
Ridden by yellow air.

It was the time when red lovers
With the red fevers burn;
A time of bells and silver seeds
And cherries on the turn.

Children looked into tall trees
And old eyes looked behind;
God in His glad October
No sullen man could find.

Out of your eyes a magic
Fell lazily as dew,
And every lad with lad's eyes
Made summer love to you.

It was a reign of roses,
Of blue flowers for the eye,
And the rustling of green girls
Under a white sky.

I dream of an old kissing-time
And the flowered follies there,
In the dim place of cherry-trees,
Of you, and yellow air.

John Shaw Neilson