

Classic Poetry Series

Judith Wright

- poems -

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Request to a Year

If the year is meditating a suitable gift,
I should like it to be the attitude
of my great- great- grandmother,
legendary devotee of the arts,

who having eight children
and little opportunity for painting pictures,
sat one day on a high rock
beside a river in Switzerland

and from a difficult distance viewed
her second son, balanced on a small ice flow, drift down the current toward a waterfall
that struck rock bottom eighty feet below,

while her second daughter, impeded,
no doubt, by the petticoats of the day,
stretched out a last-hope alpenstock
(which luckily later caught him on his way).

Nothing, it was evident, could be done;
And with the artist's isolating eye
My great-great-grandmother hastily sketched the scene.
The sketch survives to prove the story by.

Year, if you have no Mother's day present planned,
Reach back and bring me the firmness of her hand.

Judith Wright

South of my Days

South of my days' circle, part of my blood's country,
rises that tableland, high delicate outline
of bony slopes wincing under the winter,
low trees, blue-leaved and olive, outcropping granite-
clean, lean, hungry country. The creek's leaf-silenced,
willow choked, the slope a tangle of medlar and crabapple
branching over and under, blotched with a green lichen;
and the old cottage lurches in for shelter.

O cold the black-frost night. the walls draw in to the warmth
and the old roof cracks its joints; the slung kettle
hisses a leak on the fire. Hardly to be believed that summer
will turn up again some day in a wave of rambler-roses,
thrust it's hot face in here to tell another yarn-
a story old Dan can spin into a blanket against the winter.
seventy years of stories he clutches round his bones,
seventy years are hived in him like old honey.

During that year, Charleville to the Hunter,
nineteen-one it was, and the drought beginning;
sixty head left at the McIntyre, the mud round them
hardened like iron; and the yellow boy died
in the sulky ahead with the gear, but the horse went on,
stopped at Sandy Camp and waited in the evening.
It was the flies we seen first, swarming like bees.
Came to the Hunter, three hundred head of a thousand-
cruel to keep them alive - and the river was dust.

Or mustering up in the Bogongs in the autumn
when the blizzards came early. Brought them down;
down, what aren't there yet. Or driving for Cobb's on the run
up from Tamworth-Thunderbolt at the top of Hungry Hill,
and I give him a wink. I wouldn't wait long, Fred,
not if I was you. The troopers are just behind,
coming for that job at the Hillgrove. He went like a luny,
him on his big black horse.

Oh, they slide and they vanish
as he shuffles the years like a pack of conjuror's cards.
True or not, it's all the same; and the frost on the roof
cracks like a whip, and the back-log break into ash.
Wake, old man. this is winter, and the yarns are over.
No-one is listening
South of my days' circle.
I know it dark against the stars, the high lean country
full of old stories that still go walking in my sleep.

Judith Wright

The Old Prison

The rows of cells are unroofed,
a flute for the wind's mouth,
who comes with a breath of ice
from the blue caves of the south.

O dark and fierce day:
the wind like an angry bee
hunts for the black honey
in the pits of the hollow sea.

Waves of shadow wash
the empty shell bone-bare,
and like a bone it sings
a bitter song of air.

Who built and laboured here?
The wind and the sea say
-Their cold nest is broken
and they are blown away-

They did not breed nor love,
each in his cell alone
cried as the wind now cries
through this flute of stone.

Judith Wright