

Classic Poetry Series

Padraic Colum

- poems -

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A Cradle Song

O men from the fields,
Come gently within.
Tread softly, softly
O men coming in!
Mavourneen is going
From me and from you,
Where Mary will fold him
With mantle of blue!
From reek of the smoke
And cold of the floor
And the peering of things
Across the half-door.
O men of the fields,
Soft, softly come thro'
Mary puts round him
Her mantle of blue.

Padraic Colum

A Drover

To Meath of the pastures,
From wet hills by the sea,
Through Leitrim and Longford
Go my cattle and me.
I hear in the darkness
Their slipping and breathing.
I name them the bye-ways
They're to pass without heeding.
Then the wet, winding roads,
Brown bogs with black water;
And my thoughts on white ships
And the King o' Spain's daughter.
O! farmer, strong farmer!
You can spend at the fair
But your face you must turn
To your crops and your care.
And soldiers—red soldiers!
You've seen many lands;
But you walk two by two,
And by captain's commands.
O! the smell of the beasts,
The wet wind in the morn;
And the proud and hard earth
Never broken for corn;
And the crowds at the fair,
The herds loosened and blind,
Loud words and dark faces
And the wild blood behind.
(O! strong men with your best
I would strive breast to breast
I could quiet your herds
With my words, with my words.)
I will bring you, my kine,
Where there's grass to the knee;
But you'll think of scant croppings
Harsh with salt of the sea.

Padraic Colum

Fourth Station

Jesus His Mother meets:
She looks on Him and sees
The Savior in Her Son:
The Angel's word comes back:
Within her heart she says,
"Unto me let this be done!"
Still is she full of grace.
By us, too be it one,
That grace that brings us revelation!

Padraic Colum

I shall not Die for thee

O woman, shapely as the swan,
On your account I shall not die:
The men you've slain -- a trivial clan --
Were less than I.
I ask me shall I die for these --
For blossom teeth and scarlet lips --
And shall that delicate swan-shape
Bring me eclipse?
Well-shaped the breasts and smooth the skin,
The cheeks are fair, the tresses free --
And yet I shall not suffer death,
God over me!
Those even brows, that hair like gold,
Those languorous tones, that virgin way,
The flowing limbs, the rounded heel
Slight men betray!
Thy spirit keen through radiant mien,
Thy shining throat and smiling eye,
Thy little palm, thy side like foam --
I cannot die!
O woman, shapely as the swan,
In a cunning house hard-reared was I:
O bosom white, O well-shaped palm,
I shall not die!

Padraic Colum

Monkeys

Two little creatures
with faces the size of
a pair of pennies
are clasping each other
"Ah do not leave me"
One says to the other
in the high monkey -
cage in the beast shop
there are no people
to gape at them now
for people are loth
peer in the dimness
have they not builded
streets and playhouses
sky sign and bars
to lose the lonlieness
shaking the hearts
of the two little monkeys
Yes, but who watches
the penny small faces
can hear the voices
"Ah do not leave me
suck i wil give you
warmth and clasping
and if you slip from
this beam can never
find you again
Dim is the evening
and chill is the weather
there drawn from their coloured
hemisphere
the apes lilliputian
with faces the size of
a pair of pennies
and voices as low as
the flow of my blood.

Padraic Colum

Old Men Complaining

First Old Man

He threw his crutched stick down: there came
Into his face the anger flame,
And he spoke viciously of one
Who thwarted him—his son's son.
He turned his head away.—“I hate
Absurdity of language, prate
From growing fellows. We'd not stay
About the house the whole of a day
When we were young,
Keeping no job and giving tongue!
“Not us in troth! We would not come
For bit or sup, but stay from home
If we gave answers, or we'd creep
Back to the house, and in we'd peep
Just like a corncrake.

“My grandson and his comrades take
A piece of coal from you, from me
A log, or sod of turf, maybe;
And in some empty place they'll light
A fire, and stay there all night,
A wisp of lads! Now understand
The blades of grass under my hand
Would be destroyed by company!
There's no good company: we go
With what is lowest to the low!
He stays up late, and how can he
Rise early? Sure he lags in bed,
And she is worn to a thread
With calling him—his grandmother.
She's an old woman, and she must make
Stir when the birds are half awake
In dread he'd lose this job like the other!”

Second Old Man

“They brought yon fellow over here,
And set him up for an overseer:
Though men from work are turned away
That thick-necked fellow draws full pay—
Three pounds a week.... They let burn down
The timber yard behind the town
Where work was good; though firemen stand
In boots and brasses big and grand
The crow of a cock away from the place.
And with the yard they let burn too
The clock in the tower, the clock I knew
As well as I know the look in my face.”

Third Old Man

“The fellow you spoke of has broken his bounds—
He came to skulk inside of these grounds:
Behind the bushes he lay down

And stretched full hours in the sun.
He rises now, and like a crane
He looks abroad. He's off again:
Three pounds a week, and still he owes
Money in every street he goes,
Hundreds of pounds where we'd not get
The second shilling of a debt."

First Old Man

"Old age has every impediment
Vexation and discontent;
The rich have more than we: for bit
The cut of bread, and over it
The scrape of hog's lard, and for sup
Warm water in a cup.
But different sorts of feeding breaks
The body more than fasting does
With pains and aches.
"I'm not too badly off, for I
Have pipe and tobacco, a place to lie,
A nook to myself; but from my hand
Is taken the strength to back command—
I'm broken, and there's gone from me
The privilege of authority."
I heard them speak—
The old men heavy on the sod,
Letting their angers come
Between them and the thought of God.

Padraic Colum

Old Woman of the Roads

O, to have a little house!
To own the hearth and stool and all!
The heaped up sods against the fire,
The pile of turf against the wall!
To have a clock with weights and chains
And pendulum swinging up and down!
A dresser filled with shining delph,
Speckled and white and blue and brown!
I could be busy all the day
Clearing and sweeping hearth and floor,
And fixing on their shelf again
My white and blue and speckled store!
I could be quiet there at night
Beside the fire and by myself,
Sure of a bed and loth to leave
The ticking clock and the shining delph!
Och! but I'm weary of mist and dark,
And roads where there's never a house nor bush,
And tired I am of bog and road,
And the crying wind and the lonesome hush!
And I am praying to God on high,
And I am praying Him night and day,
For a little house - a house of my own
Out of the wind's and the rain's way.

Padraic Colum

Polonius and the Ballad Singers

A gaunt built woman and her son-in-law—
A broad-faced fellow, with such flesh as shows
Nothing but easy nature—and his wife,
The woman's daughter, who spills all her talk
Out of a wide mouth, but who has eyes as gray
As Connemara, where the mountain-ash
Shows berries red indeed: they enter now—
Our country singers!
"Sing, my good woman, sing us some romance
That has been round your chimney-nooks so long
'Tis nearly native; something blown here
And since made racy—like yon tree, I might say,
Native by influence if not by species,
Shaped by our winds. You understand, I think?"
"I'll sing the song, sir."
To-night you see my face—
Maybe nevermore you'll gaze
On the one that for you left his friends and kin;
For by the hard commands
Of the lord that rules these lands
On a ship I'll be borne from Cruckaunfinn!
Oh, you know your beauty bright
Has made him think delight
More than from any fair one he will gain;
Oh, you know that all his will
Strains and strives around you till
As the hawk upon his hand you are as tame!
Then she to him replied:
I'll no longer you deny,
And I'll let you have the pleasure of my charms;
For to-night I'll be your bride,
And whatever may betide
It's we will lie in one another's arms!
"You should not sing
With body doubled up and face aside—
There is a climax here—'It's we will lie'—
Hem—passionate! And what does your daughter sing?"
"A song I like when I do climb bare hills—
'Tis all about a hawk."
No bird that sits on rock or bough
Has such a front as thine;
No king that has made war his trade
Such conquest in his eyne!
I mark thee rock-like on the rock
Where none can see a shape.
I climb, but thou dost climb with wings,
And like a wish escape,
She said—
And like a wish escape!
No maid that kissed his bonny mouth
Of another mouth was glad;
Such pride was in our chieftain's eyes,

Such countenance he had!
 But since they made him fly the rocks,
 Thou, creature, art my quest.
 Then lift me with thy steady eyes.
 If then to tear my breast,
 She said—
 If then to tear my breast!
 "The songs they have
 Are the last relics of the feudal world:
 Women will keep them—byzants, doubloons,
 When men will take up songs that are as new
 As dollar bills. What song have you, young man?
 "A song my father had, sir. It was sent him
 From across the sea, and there was a letter with it,
 Asking my father to put it to a tune
 And sing it all roads. He did that, in troth,
 And five pounds of tobacco were sent with the song
 To fore-reward him. I'll sing it for you now—
 The Baltimore Exile.
 " The house I was bred in—ah, does it remain?
 Low walls and loose thatch standing lone in the rain,
 With the clay of the walls coming through with its stain,
 Like the blackbird's left nest in the briar!
 Does a child there give heed to the song of the lark,
 As it lifts and it drops till the fall of the dark,
 When the heavy-foot kine trudge home from the park,
 Or do none but the red-shank now listen?
 The sloe-bush, I know, grows close to the well,
 And its long-lasting blossoms are there, I can tell,
 When the kid that was yeaned when the first ones befell
 Can jump to the ditch that they grow on!
 But there's silence on all. Then do none ever pass
 On the way to the fair or the pattern or mass?
 Do the gray-coated lads drive the ball through the grass
 And speed to the sweep of the hurl?
 O youths of my land! Then will no Bolivar
 Ever muster your ranks for delivering war?
 Will your hopes become fixed and beam like a star?
 Will they pass like the mists from your fields?
 The swan and the swallows, the cuckoo and crane,
 May visit my land and find hillside and lake.
 And I send my song. I'll not see her awake—
 I'm too old a bird to uncage now!
 "Silver's but lead in exchange for songs,
 But take it and spend it."
 "We will. And may we meet your honor's like
 Every day's end."
 "A tune is more lasting than the voice of the birds."
 "A song is more lasting than the riches of the world."

Padraic Colum

River-Mates

I'LL be an otter, and I'll let you swim
A mate beside me; we will venture down
A deep, dark river, when the sky above
Is shut of the sun; spoilers are we,
Thick-coated; no dog's tooth can bite at our veins
With eyes and ears of poachers; deep-earthed ones
Turned hunters; let him slip past
The little vole; my teeth are on an edge
For the King-fish of the River!
I hold him up
The glittering salmon that smells of the sea;
I hold him high and whistle!
Now we go
Back to our earths; we will tear and eat
Sea-smelling salmon; you will tell the cubs
I am the Booty-bringer, I am the Lord
Of the River; the deep, dark, full and flowing River.

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She Moved Through the Faire

My young love said to me: My mother won't mind,
And my father won't slight you for your lack of kind.
She put her arms 'round me; these words she did say:
It will not be long, love, 'til our wedding day!
Then she stepped away from me, and she moved thru the Faire,
And so fondly I watched her move here and move there;
At last she turned homeward, with one star awake,
As the Swan in the evening moves over the lake.
Last night she came to me, my dead love came in,
And so soft did she move that her feet made no din;
She put her arms 'round me; these words she did say:
It will not be long, love, 'til our wedding day!

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The Plougher

Sunset and silence! A man: around him earth savage, earth broken;
Beside him two horses -- a plough!
Earth savage, earth broken, the brutes, the dawn man there in the sunset,
And the Plough that is twin to the Sword, that is founder of cities!
"Brute-tamer, plough-maker, earth-breaker! Can'st hear? There are ages
between us.
Is it praying you are as you stand there alone in the sunset?
"Surely our sky-born gods can be naught to you, earth child and earth
master?
Surely your thoughts are of Pan, or of Wotan, or Dana?
"Yet why give thoughts to the gods? Has Pan led your brutes where they
stumble?
Has Dana numbed pain of the child-bed, or Wotan put hands to your plough?
"What matter your foolish reply! O man, standing lone and bowed earthward,
Your task is a day near its close. Give thanks to the night-given God."

.....
Slowly the darkness falls, the broken lands blend with the savage;
The brute-tamer stands by the brutes, a head's breadth only above them.
A head's breadth? Ay, but therein is hell's depth, and the height up to
heaven,
And the thrones of the gods and their halls, their chariots, purples, and
splendors.

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Tulips

An age being mathematical, these flowers
Of linear stalks and spheroid blooms were prized
By men with wakened, speculative minds,
And when with mathematics they explored
The Macrocosm, and came at last to
The Vital Spirit of the World, and named it
Invisible Pure Fire, or, say, the Light,
The Tulips were the Light's receptacles.
The gold, the bronze, the red, the bright-swart Tulips!
No emblems they for us who no more dream
Of mathematics burgeoning to light
With Newton's prism and Spinoza's lens,
Or Berkeley's ultimate, Invisible Pure Fire.
In colored state and carven brilliancy
We see them now, or, more illumined,
In sudden fieriness, as flowers fit
To go with vestments red on Pentecost.

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