

Classic Poetry Series

Robert Norwood
- poems -

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Robert Norwood(27 March 1874 - 28 September 1932)

Robert Winkworth Norwood was a Canadian poet and an Episcopalian (Anglican) minister.

Life

Norwood was born in New Ross, Nova Scotia, the son of Edith Harding McKeen and Rev. Joseph W. Norwood. He was educated at Coaticook Academy and Bishop's College in Quebec, and at King's College in Nova Scotia. At King's he studied English under Charles G.D. Roberts, who encouraged him to write poetry. He graduated from King's College in 1897 and became a deacon, and was ordained a priest in 1898, Also in 1898 he published his first book of poetry, *Driftwood*, a chapbook cowritten with Charles Vernon, his former roommate at King's.

Norwood became a priest in Cape Breton, where he married Ethel McKeen, and succeeded to larger parishes in Quebec and then London, Ontario. In 1917 he was promoted to a parish in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and became an American citizen.

In the mid-1920s Norwood was a member of The Song Fishermen, a literary and social set organized by Halifax, Nova Scotia socialites Andrew and Tully Merkel that included Roberts and his cousin Bliss Carman. Andrew Merkel described Norwood as a "scintillating conversationalist" and a "profound student of mysticism."

Norwood struck up a close friendship with fellow Song Fisherman Kenneth Leslie, 18 years his junior, and the two poets "operated as a devastatingly successful pair of ladies' men when they gave poetry readings or attended social functions together." Norwood's mysticism, in particular his belief that he "was merely an instrument trained to give voice to a message that was not necessarily his", inspired Leslie's long poem, "The Shanachie Man."

From 1925 to his death in 1932 Norwood served as rector of St. Bartholemew's Episcopalian Church in New York City. In that capacity he "became ... one of the most renowned preachers in North America."

Dives In Torment

This was my failure, who thought that the feast
Rivalled the rapture of bird on the wing;
Rivalled the lily all robed like a priest;
Smoke of the pollen when Rose-censers swing.

This was my folly, who gave for a gown—
Purple and gold, and a bracelet and rings,
Shouts in the streets as I rode through the town—
Life in the love of the kinship of things.

Lazarus, Lazarus, this is my thirst,
Fever from flame of the love I have missed;
Ache of the heart for the friends I have cursed;
Longing for lips that I never have kissed!

Hell is for him who hath never found God
Hid in the bramble that burns by the way;
Findeth Him not in the stone and the clod;
Heareth Him not at the cool of the day.

Hell is for him who hath never found Man.
God and my Brother, I failing to find,
Failed to find me; so my days were a span
Void of the triumph of Spirit and Mind.

Once, I recall, at the table I leaned
Back on the breast of Pomona, my slave,
Saw through the window, with lattice-work screened,
Thee in thy rags, and I laughed! then grew grave:

Up the white street came a Man with a face
Sad with the woe and the pain of the world;
Moving with kingliness, ease, and a grace;
Crowned with wine-coloured hair wavy and curled

Over broad shoulders, so broad that I vowed
Here was Messiah—the Samson—the King!
Leaped from the table and joined with the crowd;
Offered my purple, my bracelet, my ring!

Then through the clamour and dust of the street
Words of rebuke were directed to me:
'Lift thou up Lazarus; give him a seat
High among all who are feasting with thee.'

Lift up the beggar! I laughed at Him there—
'Thou and Thy tattered ones take to the street—
I to the palace . . . Begone! . . . And beware!
Caiaphas comes, and the Sanhedrin meet!

'Go! or I hale Thee to judgment of them;
Go! or Thy God shall avail Thee in vain;
Thou art of Japheth, and I am of Shem,
Lazarus, outcast and cursèd with Cain!

'Needs must there be a division of men;
Hewer of wood is the Gibeonite,
Cutter of stone in the quarries, and then
Slave to the Covenant-Israelite.'

'Nay, all are equal and loved of the Lord,'
Whispered the Stranger. The listening street
Filled with the murmur of those who adored,
Hushed at the sound of His voice that was sweet,

Stirring my heart as a harp in the hail,
Silent for ages, is stirred by the wind
Breathed through the arras; and memories call
Over the summits of spirit and mind.

Yea, for a moment I struggled with Love;
Yearned to embrace thee and pour on thy hair
Oil of anointing, and place thee above
All of the guests who were gathering there—

There in my palace of pleasure and ease,
Builded by Herod, and bought with my gold,
Portaled and curtained with soft tapestries
Woven at looms of the Orient, sold

Down in Damascus. A palm in the sands,

That was my palace; a palm with a soul
Breathing of beauty when each leaf expands
Out to the desert which brims like a bowl—

Brimms like a bowl of Falernian wine
Turned to the sun! O my palace and hall!
O sound of the psaltery under the vine
Grown in the garden! O footsteps that fall

Soft as the leaves in a pomegranate grove,
Soft on the pavement of beryl and pearl
Under the moon when my Miriam strove,
Laughing, to dance down the Syrian girl!

These thrust between my compassion and thee—
Beauty that mocked like a maid from her bower—
Beauty that looked through the lattice at me;
Sighed: 'I have tarried, my Love, for this hour!'

Then to the palace all flaming I went,
Flaming with love for Pomona, my pride.
Back like a bow her dear body I bent,
Kissed her and placed her in joy at my side;

Crowned her with myrtle, proclaimed her a queen;
Drank to her eyes and her lips and her hair;
Clasped on her throat of an ivory sheen
Gems of an order kings only might wear.

Oh, how she sparkled and gleamed like a sword!
Oh, how the cymbals and tabours did sound!
Oh, My Pomona, my loved and adored—
Dust of the body is dust of the ground!

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For I forgot Him, and bought with my gold
Houses and lands. Yea, I sought far and wide
Pleasure and ease. Then one day I was old.
Darkness came over the noon . . . and I died!

Dead and companioned in pomp to the grave!

Dead and forgotten in less than a day
Save by Pomona, my mistress and slave
Sold unto Herod! . . Oh, she had a way,

Turn of the head and glance of the eye!
Touch of the hand and a fall of the feet!
Voice that was coo of the dove and a cry
Heard in the night when the seraphim meet!

Sometimes I fancy Gehenna's abyss
Gleams with a light that is love; and I feel
Lips on my lips in the tenderest kiss,
Making hell heaven: as though the appeal

Sent from my soul to Pomona had gained
Heart and the whole of her throned on a star,
Where for an æon of bliss she hath reigned
Lonely for Dives so lost and afar!

Lazarus! Nearer! The light on thy face
Shines through the dark! Oh, what glory is thine!
Nay, not too near lest thou see my disgrace
Naked! behold bruised the image divine!

Lazarus! Pity! Pursue not my soul
Down the last gulf! I am fearful of thee—
Not of Jehovah, Whose thunders may roll
Over my head—Have thou pity on me!

This have I learned in the torment of hell:
Man is the judge of the soul that hath sin;
Man must raise man from the depths where he fell,
Hurled by the hand of his passion. Begin,

Lazarus, Lord of the Light and the dark;
Stand on the cloud that hath bridged the abyss,
Judging my cause; for my spirit is stark
Under thy glance in abandon of bliss!

Yea, there is joy in the judgment; a peace
I have not known in an æon of pain;
Joy in the thought that thy love will not cease

Till it hath cleansed all my spirit from stain.

Therefore I hail thee, O Lazarus! cry:
'Hail to the love that restoreth the years
The locusts have eaten! Search me and try
Thought of my heart and tale of my tears!'

Try me and prove me; for I am undone,
Conquered by love of a love that hath sought
Me unto hell! Thou hast triumphed and won,
Lazarus, who for my spirit hath fought.

Yield I the trophies of battle; lay down
All of the pride and the hatred of heart;
Weeping I give thee my sceptre and crown;
Nothing I claim; not a tithe, not a part!

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Lazarus, art thou the same that I saw
Begging for crumbs? Thou hast changed, thou hast changed!
Through what dominions of wonder and awe,
Beauty and joy, hast thou ranged, hast thou ranged?

Kingly and glorious, mantled with flame,
Lo! in thyself the Messiah I see.
Lazarus, thou and the Christ art the same,
Thou art the Christ and the Master of me—

Thou art Messiah! And this Paradise! . . .
There is Pomona! There Mother who gave
Breast to her babe! From Gehenna I rise
Cleansed by a love that is mighty to save!

Light, and the sound of a song that is love!
Light, and the freedom of spirit to soar!
Light, and Messiah enthronèd above
High where the seraphim bow and adore!

Robert Norwood

His Lady Of The Sonnets Ii

I meet you in the mystery of the night,
A dear Dream-Goddess on a crescent moon;
An opalescent splendour, like a noon
Of lilies; and I wonder that the height
Should darken for the depth to give me light;
Light of your face, so lovely that I swoon
With gazing, and then wake to find how soon
Joy of the world fades when you fade from sight.

Beholding you, I am Endymion,
Lost and immortal in Latmian dreams;
With Dian bending down to look upon
Her shepherd, whose æonian slumber seems
A moment, twinkling like a starry gem
Among the jewels of her diadem.

Robert Norwood

His Lady Of The Sonnets Iv

My love is like a spring among the hills
Whose brimming waters may not be confined
But pour one torrent through the ways that wind
Down to a garden; there the rose distills
Its nectar; there a tall, white lily fills
Night with anointing of two lovers, blind,
Dumb, deaf, of body, spirit, and of mind
From breathless blending of far-sundered wills.

Long ere my love had reached you, hard I strove
To send its torrent through the barren fields;
I wanted you, the lilyed treasure-trove
Of innocence, whose dear possession yields
Immortal gladness to my heart that knows
How you surpass the lily and the rose.

Robert Norwood

His Lady Of The Sonnets IX

Last night—or was it in the golden morn—
Once more I dreamed that I alone did fare
Forth into spirit-silences; and there
I found you not; my star was set! Forlorn,
I sought the kindred company of worn
And stricken souls—lost, sundered souls, who bear
Old and avoided crosses with each care
Woven together in their crowns of thorn.

Gods of the patient, vain endeavour, these
Claimed me and called me fellow, comrade, friend,
And bade me join in their brave litanies;
Because, though I had failed you, I dared bend
Before you without hope of one reward,
Save that in loving you my soul still soared.

Robert Norwood

His Lady Of The Sonnets V

Like one great opal on the breast of Night,
Soft and translucent, hangs the orb of June!
I hear wild pipings of a joyous tune
Played on a golden reed for the delight
Of you, my hidden, lovely Eremite—
You by the fountain from the marble hewn—
You silent as in dream, with flowers strewn
About your feet—you goddess, robed in white!

Mute and amazed, I at the broken wall
Lean fearful, lest the sudden, dreadful dawn
For me Diana's awful doom let fall;
And I be cursed with curious Actæon,
Save that you find in me this strong defence—
My adoration of your innocence.

Robert Norwood

His Lady Of The Sonnets Vi

When from the rose mist of creation grew
God's patient waiting in your wide-set eyes,
The morning stars, and all the host that flies
On wings of love, paused at the wondrous blue
With which the Master, mindful of the hue,
Stained first the crystal dome of summer skies;
And afterward the violet that vies
With amethyst, before He fashioned you.

And I have trembled with those ancient stars,
My heart has known the flame-winged seraphs' song;
For no indifferent, dreamy eyelid bars
Me from the blue, nor veils with lashes long
Your love, that to my tender gazing grows
Bold to confess it: I am glad he knows!

Robert Norwood

His Lady Of The Sonnets X

Last night I crossed the spaces to your side,
As you lay sleeping in the sacred room
Of our great moment. Like a lily's bloom,
Fragile and white were you, my spirit-bride,
For pain and loneliness with you abide,
And Death had thought to touch you with his doom,
Until Love stood angelic at the tomb,
Drew sword, smote him, and life's door opened wide.

I looked on you and breathed upon your hair—
Your hair of such soft, brown, translucent gold!
Nor did you know that I knelt down in prayer,
Clasped hands, and worshipped you for the untold
Magnificence of womanhood divine—
God's miracle of Water turned to Wine!

Robert Norwood

His Lady Of The Sonnets Xxiv

I am all gladness like a little child!
Grief's tragic figure of the veiled face
Fades from my path, moving with measured pace
Back from the splendour that breaks on the wild,
High hills of sorrow, where the storm-clouds piled
In drift of tears. Lo! with what tender grace
Joy holds the world again in her embrace
Since you came forth, and looked on me, and smiled.

Down in the valley shines a scimiter—
A stream with autumn-gold deep damascened;
And of the bards of day one loiterer
Still lingers at his song, securely screened
By foliage. Dear, what miracle is this,
Transforming void and chaos with a kiss!

Robert Norwood

His Lady Of The Sonnets Xxviii

Companion of the highroad, hail! all hail!
Day on his shoulder flame of sunset bears,
As he goes marching where the autumn flares
A banner to the sky; in russet mail
The trees are trooping hither to assail
Twilight with spears; a rank of coward cares
Creep up, as though to take us unawares,
And find their stratagems of none avail.

Accept the challenge of the royal hills,
And dare adventure as we always dared!
Life with red wine his golden chalice fills,
And bids us drink to all who forward fared—
Those lost, white armies of the host of dream;
Those dauntless, singing pilgrims of the Gleam!

Robert Norwood