

**Classic Poetry Series**

**Karle Wilson Baker**  
**- poems -**

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## Karle Wilson Baker(1878 - 1960)

an American poet and author, born in Little Rock, Ark. to Kate Florence Montgomery Wilson and William Thomas Murphey Wilson. Educated at the University of Chicago, she studied under poet William Vaughn Moody and novelist Robert Herrick, and later went on to write her own poems and novels. In spite of the frequent mordant bits, her poems have visions of real beauty.

When Dr. Birdwell convinced Karle Wilson Baker to teach Contemporary Poetry for the summer sessions in 1924, he added to his faculty Texas' most prestigious poet. No other faculty member had the national recognition which she enjoyed; indeed, no other college or university in Texas could boast a poet of such acclaim. By 1924, Karle Wilson Baker had published her first four books at one of the nation's most important scholarly presses: the Yale University Press.

Mr. and Mrs. Thomas E. Baker were personal friends with President and Mrs. Birdwell, and Dr. Birdwell recognized the value Baker would add to the faculty. She was sought after to lecture as a visiting speaker at most of the other universities in the state and at some across the nation. When the visiting Board of Regents came to dedicate Stephen F. Austin State Teachers College on April 30, 1924, they were honored at a luncheon sponsored by the Rotary Club. Dr. Birdwell chose Karle Wilson Baker to be one of the major speakers on the program. She read her newly created ballad, " Within the Alamo" and the poem she had written the year before honoring the new college, "The Pine Tree Hymn."

Karle Wilson Baker was "featured" in the school's summer catalogue in 1924; hers was the only faculty photograph in the brochure. The school administration definitely thought of her as a "drawing card" for the school and used her in its publicity. The inaugural issue of The Pine Log featured a large picture of Mrs. Baker with the heading, "Will Teach In The Summer School." Baker was further honored in June 1924, when Southern Methodist University awarded her an Honorary Doctor of Letters because of her literary achievements. Karle Wilson Baker intended to teach only one summer at SFASTC--she stayed ten years!

Karle Wilson Baker first came to Nacogdoches in September 1900, where her parents, the ns, lived. She taught school in Little Rock from October 1902 until June 1906, when she moved to Nacogdoches permanently. She had spent most of her summers at her parents' home and had fallen in love with the natural beauty of the surroundings, its fascinating history, and with one of its citizens, Thomas Ellis Baker. The Bakers married in 1907. Prior to this time, much of her

life had been spent in larger towns or cities, first in Little Rock and later as a student at the University of Chicago. Throughout her life, Mrs. Baker enjoyed visiting cities and participating in the cultural and educational benefits a city could offer. The urbanity and poise Mrs. Baker brought to the young college was obvious to all who knew her--townspeople and students alike.

Three of her most important books were published or written during her tenure at SFASTC. She published her last book of collected poems, *Dreamers on Horseback*; a book of essays on birdlife in Nacogdoches, *The Birds of Tanglewood*; and wrote a novel, *Family Style*, about the newly discovered East Texas oil field (published 1937). She was nominated for the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry for *Dreamers on Horseback*. Mrs. Baker wrote another novel, *The Star of the Wilderness*, after the SFA years. Nacogdoches became further immortalized in the state through these works.

Karle Wilson Baker grew to appreciate the students she taught and felt they could teach her even as she taught them. "In teaching literature to these young people I was making a vital and illuminating sort of contact with a whole new world. . . these boys and girls were the sons and daughters of the little farms and the red hills and in the sandy flats under the pines; and in studying poetry with them I came to know that little world as it presented itself to the wistfulness and eagerness of youth."

In a recent survey, the author contacted over two hundred SFA Alumni who attended the college during the years Mrs. Baker was a teacher (1924-34). To date, about seventy former students have replied. An overwhelming majority refer to the excellent quality of the courses they had with Mrs. Baker. Grateful students have vivid memories of Mrs. Baker even though almost sixty-five years have intervened. One student recalls an early incident:

"When Mrs. Baker first began teaching English in SFA, a man trying to register noticed that the English he must take was taught by her. Of course, he didn't know her, but he did think that he knew he didn't want a woman teacher, so he went to Dr. Birdwell to try to have something done about it, but Dr. Birdwell advised him to go ahead and take the course, telling him that he was sure he would enjoy it. When the term was over, this man went to Dr. Birdwell and told him how much he enjoyed the course; he also told Dr. Birdwell that he thought that it should be compulsory for everyone to take a course in English from Mrs. Baker!"

Dr. Birdwell understood the prestige Karle Wilson Baker brought to the faculty. Allowances were made, and she had the distinction of being the only married

woman in any department. Also, Dr. Birdwell had great respect for KWB as a writer as well as a teacher. After he read her novel written during the SFA years, Dr. Birdwell commented, "Family Style will be more popular a quarter of a century from now than now. It would not surprise me to see English teachers putting it on the required reading list as an example of realistic and yet beautiful English."

In July 1924, about a month after Mrs. Baker started teaching, she received a letter from Professor J. B. Hubbell at Southern Methodist University . Hubbell was assuming the editorship of the Texas Review which was moving from the University of Texas to S.M.U. He asked her to serve as an advisory editor and asked her to send him ideas about what the "new" Review should be like. He wanted to pattern his review after the Yale Review, which he considered to be the best in the country. Mrs. Baker was the logical choice since she knew more about the Yale Review than anyone in Texas. Between 1914 and 1920, she had been the most frequently published poet in the Yale Review with twenty-six publications. In her reply accepting the advisory position, she also referred to her classes in summer school. These are her earliest recorded reactions to the new job: "I have been having a fascinating time--especially with the work in contemporary poetry. I hope to be able to repeat the course this fall, for I have really spent the time this summer learning how to teach it. They [students] have the scantiest of backgrounds to build against, for the most part, but they have been delightfully responsive, and the work has been a joy."

Many students surveyed remarked that they were only sixteen years old at the time they were in Mrs. Baker's class. A typical response would describe Mrs. Baker as "a gracious, stately, dignified person, and a wonderful teacher." Some students included a well-loved Karle Wilson Baker poem in the reply. Some recalled Mrs. Baker's bringing the poet Robert Frost to the campus to speak. Most students surveyed who were not English majors remember Mrs. Baker either because she wrote the poem that became the school song, "The Pine Tree Hymn," or because of the Karle Wilson Baker Dramatic Club named in her honor.

One student recollected the day of a test: "I remember one occasion, an important blue book exam. Mrs. Baker was ill. She sent the printed test and left us to our honor--no supervision. One outspoken student asked the group if we should share answers, or be honest. We voted 100 percent that we had too much respect for Mrs. Baker, and we would not violate her trust. Not a single student cheated."

Another student, Victor Fain, testified about student awareness of Mrs. Baker's fame : "All of us seemed to be fully aware and appreciative of Mrs. Baker's talent and contributions. I know I felt it an honor to be in her class, and as young and

naive as I was, I realized what an enhancement she was to our college."

Some of the former students interviewed recalled the Winter Term, 1929, when Baker's English 216 class presented a program on the "new poetry" (contemporary and experimental) to an assembly of students. A student on the program remarked that earlier she had known "practically nothing about the modern movement or present day poets. . . My entire view of poetry has changed. . . I made the surprising discovery that poets are people. . . Poetry is life in words." At the assembly, Mrs. Baker's students read poems by contemporary American poets. Frances Rudisill was the Mistress of Ceremonies. Two poems were presented as dance interpretations by Denard Haden. One student who was present at the event, recalls, "When Dr. Birdwell introduced Mrs. Baker as speaker in Special Assembly, the entire student body waved, clapped hands, and called for 'more'."

Mrs. Dale Herrington of Garrison retains in her memory an unfaded portrait of Mrs Baker:

Let me grow lovely, growing old,  
So many fine things do:  
Trees, and ivory, and gold,  
And silks need not be new.

"Her own poem described her. Mrs. Baker walked with dignity and poise. Even before she entered the classroom, I thought of lavender perfume. Her lovely gray hair was puffed up on the sides and brought to a bun on the top of her head. She had a natural charm and a very droll sense of humor. I visited in her home. There she sat in a high-backed chair with the same dignity she carried everywhere. The little things she cared about most were around her--a few books, a new magazine, a writing pad, and I think, either a kitten or a dog. In teaching, she brought out the beauty in all literature, never raising her voice above its normal pitch. Her students had to listen intently to follow her thoughts."

Throughout her life, Karle Wilson Baker saw herself as a student. She attended the University of Chicago, Columbia University, and the University of California at Berkeley. (She took a leave of absence from teaching at SFA while she was at Berkeley.) An amusing anecdote has come down from the Berkeley days that must have been often repeated by her in class since so many of the former students interviewed referred to it: Mrs. Baker was a student in a contemporary poetry class. The professor read a poem and then proceeded to explain to the class what the poet intended; he did not realize that Karle Wilson Baker, his student, was the author because he thought the poet was a male. After he spoke

at some length about the poem, Mrs. Baker hesitatingly raised her hand, identified herself as the poet, and gave the real meaning she had intended in the poem!

Some students surveyed reported that they did not have Mrs. Baker in class but that they knew her "through her poetry." Several students interviewed remembered hearing Karle Wilson Baker read poetry in her garden at home. One student who was in the Contemporary Poetry class, Inez Washburn Gilmore, recalls Mrs. Baker's melodious speaking voice as she read her own poetry as well as the works of other modern poets to the class. She also recalls the poet's natural modesty. Mrs. Gilmore said the class preferred Mrs. Baker's poetry above all others and that they often pled with her to read to them. On one occasion, the class of thirty-six members signed a petition and presented it to her: "Mrs. Baker, The class would be glad to have you read some of your own poetry to us."

The "former-student" survey has been humbling. Many of the letters were obviously written with great effort. Some of the students are now in their late eighties and early nineties. Several mentioned serious illnesses they are suffering from now, but various infirmities did not stop them from responding. Most impressive is the sense of devotion that these students still feel toward Mrs. Baker. The adjectives used to describe Mrs. Baker were not "famous" or "important" (which, of course, she was), but rather the terms used to describe her were "inspirational," "kind," "gentle," "encouraging," and "respected."

# A Clear Night

I have worn this day as a fretting, ill-made garment,  
Impatient to be rid of it.

And lo, as I drew it off over my shoulders  
This jewel caught in my hair.

Karle Wilson Baker

# Apple And Rose

My little daughter is a tea-rose,  
Satin to the touch,  
Wine to the lips,  
And a faint, delirious perfume.  
But my little son  
Is a June apple,  
Firm and cool,  
And scornful of too much sweetness,  
But full of tang and flavor  
And better than bread to the hungry.  
O wild winds, and clumsy, pilfering bees,  
With the whole world to be wanton in,  
Will you not spare my little tea-rose?  
And O ruthless blind creatures,  
Who lay eggs of evil at the core of life,  
Pass by my one red apple,  
That is so firm and sound!

Karle Wilson Baker



# Blue Smoke

The flame of my life burns low  
Under the cluttered days,  
Like a fire of leaves.  
But always a little blue, sweet-smelling smoke  
Goes up to God.

Karle Wilson Baker

# Days

Some days my thoughts are just cocoons- all cold, and dull and blind,  
They hang from dripping branches in the grey woods of my mind;

And other days they drift and shine - such free and flying things!  
I find the gold-dust in my hair, left by their brushing wings.

Karle Wilson Baker

# Good Company

To-day I have grown taller from walking with the trees,  
The seven sister-poplars who go softly in a line;  
And I think my heart is whiter for its parley with a star  
That trembled out at nightfall and hung above the pine.

The call-note of a redbird from the cedars in the dusk  
Woke his happy mate within me to an answer free and fine;  
And a sudden angel beckoned from a column of blue smoke -  
Lord, who am I that they should stoop - these holy folk of thine?

Karle Wilson Baker

# I Shall Be Loved As Quiet Things

I shall be loved as quiet things  
Are loved--white pigeons in the sun,  
Curled yellow leaves that whisper down  
One after one;

The silver reticence of smoke  
That tells no secret of its birth  
Among the fiery agonies  
That turn the earth;

Cloud-islands; reaching arms of trees;  
The frayed and eager little moon  
That strays unheeded through a high  
Blue afternoon.

The thunder of my heart must go  
Under the muffling of the dust--  
As my gray dress has guarded it  
The grasses must;

For it has hammered loud enough,  
Clamored enough, when all is said:  
Only its quiet part shall live  
When I am dead.

Karle Wilson Baker

# Let Me Grow Lovely

Let me grow lovely, growing old--  
So many fine things do:  
Laces, and ivory, and gold,  
And silks need not be new;  
And there is healing in old trees,  
Old streets a glamour hold;  
Why may not I, as well as these,  
Grow lovely, growing old?

Karle Wilson Baker

## Nacogdoches Speaks

I was The Gateway. Here they came, and passed,  
The homespun centaurs with their arms of steel  
And taut heart-strings: wild wills, who thought to deal  
Bare-handed with jade Fortune, tracked at last  
Out of her silken lairs into the vast  
Of a Man's world. They passed, but still I feel  
The dint of hoof, the print of booted heel,  
Like prick of spurs--the shadows that they cast.  
I do not vaunt their valors, or their crimes:  
I tell my secrets only to some lover,  
Some taster of spilled wine and scattered musk.  
But I have not forgotten; and sometimes,  
The things that I remember rise, and hover.  
A sharper perfume in some April dusk.

Karle Wilson Baker

## Poet's Song

Dropp'd feather from the wings of God  
My little songs and snatches are,  
So light He does not hear them fall  
As He goes by, from star to star.  
Dropp'd feathers from the wings of God  
I find, and braid them in my hair;  
Men heed them not--they only make  
My soul unto herself more fair.

Karle Wilson Baker

# Texas Cowboy

From garden-beds I tend, it is not far  
To those great ranges where he used to ride;  
Time's shadowy Door still stands a rift ajar,  
And Fancy, glancing backward and aside,  
May glimpse him whirling in a storm, of dust,  
A flashing bronze against a burning sky,  
Before a sea of tossing horns up-thrust,  
A peril thousand-pronged, to breast or die;  
Or lying with locked hands beneath his head,  
Watching the stars beside a lonely fire,  
About him dim immensity outspread  
Within, dim gulfs of question and desire.  
He is a Thought; he is not flesh-and-bone;  
He is immortal Youth astride a Dream:  
The hungry flame that eats to ash and stone  
The gorgeous fruitage of the things that seem;  
And I (who sand, with pang and toil enough,  
My roots at last down to the nether springs,  
Yet, born to coax the shapely from the rough,  
Have shunned the red and jagged edge of things),  
A Woman with a bird, a book, a flower,  
Who, sifting life, has kept the quiet part,  
Whose days like pearls are sorted, hour by hour -  
Why is it that he gallops through my heart?

Karle Wilson Baker



# The Cardinal And His Lady

The redbird is the core of fire at the heart of by still living;  
And his little lady is the soft ashes covering the half-seen embers."

Karle Wilson Baker

# The Tree

My life is a tree,  
Yoke-fellow of the earth;  
Pledged,  
By roots too deep for remembrance,  
To stand hard against the storm,  
To fill by Place.  
(But high in the branches of my green tree there is a wild  
bird singing:  
Wind-free are the wings of my bird: she hath built no  
mortal nest.)

Karle Wilson Baker

# Unser Gott

They held a great prayer-service in Berlin,  
And augured German triumph from some words  
Said to be spoken by the Jewish God  
To Gideon, which signified that He  
Was staunchly partial to the Israelites.  
The aisles were thronged; and in the royal box  
(I had it from a tourist who was there,  
Clutching her passport, anxious, like the rest),  
There sat the Kaiser, looking 'very sad.'  
And then they sang; she said it shook the heart.  
The women sobbed; tears salted bearded lips  
Unheeded; and my friend looked back and saw  
A young girl crumple in her mother's arms.  
They carried out a score of them, she said,  
While German hearts, through bursting German throats  
Poured out, Ein Feste Burg Ist Unser Gott!

(Yea, 'Unser Gott! Our strength is Unser Gott!  
Not that light-minded Bon Dieu of France!')

I think we all have made our God too small.  
There was a young man, a good while ago,  
Who taught that doctrine... but they murdered him  
Because he wished to share the Jewish God  
With other folk.  
They are long-lived, these fierce  
Old hating Gods of nations; but at last  
There surely will be spilled enough of blood  
To drown them all! The deeps of sea and air,  
Of old the seat of gods, no more are safe,  
For mines and monoplanes. The Germans, now,  
Can surely find and rout the God of France  
With Zeppelins, or some slim mother's son  
Of Paris, or of Tours, or Brittany,  
Can drop a bomb into the Feste Burg,  
And, having crushed the source of German strength,  
Die happy in his blazing monoplane.

Sad jesting! If there be no God at all,  
Save in the heart of man, why, even so --  
Yea, all the more, -- since we must make our God,  
Oh, let us make Him large enough for all,  
Or cease to prate of Him! If kings must fight,  
Let them fight for their glory, openly,  
And plain men for their lands and for their homes,  
And heady youths, who go to see the fun,  
Blaspheme not God. True, maybe we might leave  
The God of Germany to some poor frau  
Who cannot go, who can but wait and mourn,  
Except that she will teach Him to her sons --  
A God quite scornful of the Slavic soul,  
And much concerned to keep Alsace-Lorraine.  
They should go godless, too -- the poor, benumbed  
Crushed, anguished women, till their hearts can hold  
A greater Comforter!

(Yet it is hard  
To make Him big enough! For me, I like  
The English and the Germans and the French,  
The Russians, too; and Servians, I should think,  
Might well be very interesting to God.  
But, do the best I may, my God is white,  
And hardly takes a nigger seriously  
This side of Africa. Not those, at least  
Who steal my wood, and of a summer night  
Keep me awake with shouting, where they sit  
With monkey-like fidelity and glee  
Grinding through their well-oiled sausage-mill --  
The dead machinery of the white man's church --  
Raw jungle-fervor, mixed with scraps sucked dry  
Of Israel's old sublimities: not those.  
And when they threaten us, the Higher Race,  
Think you, which side is God's? Oh, let us pray  
Lest blood yet spurt to wash that black skin white,  
As now it flows because a German hates  
A Cossack, and an Austrian a Serb!)

What was it that he said so long ago,

The young man who outgrew the Jewish God --  
'Not a sparrow falleth --?' Ah, God, God,  
And there shall fall a million murdered men!

Karle Wilson Baker

# Within The Alamo

He drew a straight line  
Across the dirt floor:  
Within, it was death-still--  
Without, was a roar  
And a scream of the trumpets:  
Within, was a Word--  
And a line drawn clean  
By the sweep of a sword.  
No help was coming, now--  
That hope was done.  
No more the free air,  
no more the sun  
Bright on the blue leagues  
Of buffalo-clover.  
Travis drew a line  
And they all crossed over.  
Travis had a wife at home,  
Travis was young;  
Travis had a little boy  
Whose tight arms clung,  
But Travis saw a far light  
Shining before:  
Travis drew a sword-cut  
Across the dirt floor.

And now the old fort stands  
Placid and dim,  
Blinking and dreaming  
Of them and of him;  
And now past the Plaza  
Other tides roar,  
since Travis wrote "Valor"  
Across the sand floor,  
And the guns they will rust,  
And the captains will go,  
And an end come at last  
To the wars that we know,  
But as long as there travails  
A Spirit in man,

In a war that was ancient  
Before Time began,  
Here will the brave come  
To read a high Word--  
Cut clean in the dust  
By the stroke of a sword.

Karle Wilson Baker