

Classic Poetry Series

Anne Barbara Ridler
- poems -

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Anne Barbara Ridler(30 July 1912 – 15 October 2001)

Anne Barbara Ridler OBE (née Bradby) was a British poet, and Faber and Faber editor, selecting the Faber A Little Book of Modern Verse with T. S. Eliot (1941). Her Collected Poems (Carcenet Press) were published in 1994. She turned to libretto work and verse plays; it was later in life that she earned official recognition, receiving an OBE in 2001.

Family

Ridler was the daughter of HC Bradby, a housemaster at Rugby School, where she was born. Her mother, Violet Bradby, born Milford, wrote popular children's stories and was the sister of Humphrey S. Milford, Publisher to the University of Oxford. One of her great-grandfathers was Charles Richard Sumner, Bishop of Winchester, a brother of John Bird Sumner, Archbishop of Canterbury. Her uncle, GF Bradby, was the author of *The Lanchester Tradition* (1919), while her aunt Barbara Bradby was the joint author of *The Village Labourer* (1911). Her cousins included the composer Robin Milford and the Rev. Dick Milford, vicar of the University Church of St Mary the Virgin, Oxford.

Life

Anne Bradby was educated at Downe House School and later published a biography of her headmistress, Olive Willis. After six months in Florence and Rome, she took a diploma in journalism at King's College London.

In 1938, she married Vivian Ridler, the future Printer to Oxford University (1958–78), but then the manager of the Bunhill Press, London, and they had two daughters and two sons.

She edited *Charles Williams: The Image of the City and other Essays* (1958) and *Charles Williams: Selected Writings* (1961). A Christian and friend and correspondent of C. S. Lewis, she was on the edge of the Inklings group. Also closely associated with TS Eliot, she wrote a short but powerful poem, "I Who am Here Dissembled", full of allusions to images in Eliot's own poems, for the anthology *T. S. Eliot: A Symposium in honour of his sixtieth birthday*.

For a short time in the 1940s, Ridler was also a successful Verse Dramatist with such plays as *Cain* (1943) and *Shadow Factory: A Nativity Play* (1945).

A Dream Observed

Out from his bed the breaking seas
By waking eyes unseen
Now fall, aquatic creatures whirl
And he whirls through the ambient green.

The sea lion and the scolopendra
Lolling in sleep he sees
Strange in their ways, and the swift changes
Their landscape makes, from shells to trees.

Down English lanes a camel walks,
Or untrammelled flies.
But I, wakeful and watching, see
How chilly out of the clothes he lies.

Easy an act to cover him warm:
Such a lover's small success
Like the heaped mind so humble in sleep
But points our actual powerlessness.

Monsters in dreams he sees, yet lies
At peace in his curling bed;
Blessings that outdo all distress
Implicit in his sleeping head.

Anne Barbara Ridler

A Letter

Lying in bed this morning, just a year
Since our first days, I was trying to assess --
Against my natural caution -- by desire
And how the fact outdid it, my happiness:
And finding the awkwardness of keeping clear
Numberless flamingo thoughts and memories,
My dear and dearest husband, in this kind
Of rambling letter, I'll disburse my mind.
Technical problems have always given me trouble:
A child stiff at the fiddle, my ear had praise
And my intention only; so, as was natural,
Coming to verse, I hid my lack of ease
By writing only as I thought myself able,
Escaped the crash of the bold by salt originalities.
This is one reason for writing far from one's heart;
A better is, that one fears it may be hurt.
By an inadequate style one fears to cheapen
Glory, and that it may be blurred if seen
Through the eye's used centre, not the new margin.
It is the hardest thing with love to burn

And write it down, for what was the real passion
Left to its own words will seem trivial and thin.
We can in making love look face to face:
In poetry, crooked, and with no embrace.
Tolstoy's hero found in his newborn child
Only another aching, vulnerable part;
And it is true our first joy hundredfold
Increased our dangers, pricking in every street
In accidents and wars: yet this is healed
Not by reason, but with an endurance of delight
Since our marriage, which, once thoroughly known,
Is known for good, though in time it were gone.
You, hopeful baby with the erring toes,
Grew, it seems to me, to a natural pleasure
In the elegant strict machine, from the abstruse
Science of printing to the rich red and azure
It plays on hoardings, rusty industrial noise,
All these could add to your inherited treasure:
A poise which many wish for, writing the machine
Poems of laboured praise, but few attain.
And loitered up your childhood to my arms.

I would hold you there for ever, and know
Certainly now, that though the vacuum looms
Quotidian dullness, in these beams don't die
They're wrong who say that happiness never comes
On earth, that was spread here its crystal sea.
And since you, loiterer, did compose this wonder,
Be with me still, and may God hold his thunder.

Anne Barbara Ridler

At Parting

Since we through war awhile must part
Sweetheart, and learn to lose
Daily use
Of all that satisfied our heart:
Lay up those secrets and those powers
Wherewith you pleased and cherished me these two years:

Now we must draw, as plants would,
On tubers stored in a better season,
Our honey and heaven;
Only our love can store such food.
Is this to make a god of absence?
A new-born monster to steal our sustenance?

We cannot quite cast out lack and pain.
Let him remain-what he may devour
We can well spare:
He never can tap this, the true vein.
I have no words to tell you what you were,
But when you are sad, think, Heaven could give no more.

Anne Barbara Ridler

Autumn Day

The raging colour of this cold Friday
Eats up our patience like a fire,
Consumes our willingness to endure,
Here the crumpled maple, a gold fabric,
The beech by beams empurpled, the holy sycamore,
Berries red-hot, the rose's core--
The sun emboldens to burn in porphyry and amber.

Pick up the remnants of our resignation
Where we left them, and bring our loving passion,
Before the mist from the dark sea at our feet
Where mushrooms cling like limpets in the grass,
Quenching our fierceness, leaves us in a worse case.

Anne Barbara Ridler

Before Sleep

Now that you lie
In London afar,
And may sleep longer
Though lonelier,
For I shall not wake you
With a nightmare,
Heaven plant such peace in us
As if no parting stretched between us.

The world revolves
And is evil;
God's image is
Wormeaten by the devil;
May the good angel
Have no rival
By our beds, and we lie curled
At the sound unmoving centre of the world.

In our good nights
When we were together,
We made, in that stillness
Where we loved each other,
A new being, of both
Yet above either:
So, when I cannot share your sleep,
Into this being, half yours, I creep.

Anne Barbara Ridler

Bunhill's Fields

Under cool trees the City tombs
extend, and nearer lie
stones above Blake's and Bunyan's bones
to Vivian's working days than I.

Since he is gentle, wild and good
as you were, peaceable Shades,
there may he go within your care
as in my heart his love resides.

Such a care as held unharmed
the tree within the fire;
spread wings like those that led
Tobias in the dangerous shire.

And if I fear his death too much,
let me not learn more faith
by sad trial of what I dread,
nor grieve him by my own death.

For our faith is one which may
convert but not console:
we shall not, except by our own will,
part for ever in the gape of hell.

Anne Barbara Ridler

Collected Poems (1994)

Lying in bed this morning, just a year
Since our first days, I was trying to assess -
Against my natural caution - by desire
And how the fact outdid it, my happiness:
And finding the awkwardness of keeping clear
Numberless flamingo thoughts and memories,
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Edlesborough

Beyond the Chiltern coast, this church:
A lighthouse in dry seas of standing corn.
Bees hive in the tower; the outer stone
Pared and frittered in sunlight, flakes with the years:
Clunch crumbles, but silence, exaltation, endures.

The brass-robed Rector stretched on his tomb endures.
Within, we go upon the dragon and the bat,
Walk above the world, without,
Uplifted among grey lavender, beech and sycamore,
Shades of the sea-born chalk, indelible and austere.

If we see history from this hill
It is upon its own conditions, here
Each season swirls and eddies the circle of a year
Round the spectator church, and human eyes
Take, on its plinth, a long focus of centuries.

We seem like gods on any hill.
From here all toil resembles rest, and yet
Unlike a god we feel ourselves shut out.
Surely that farm in a carved blue curve of trees
So still with all its creatures, holds the unattainable peace?

It is Time's camouflage deceives us.
There it extends like space: whatever moves
(A horse to drink, a reaper to stack the sheaves)
Displays the movement in its whole succession,
Not a change of terms, only a changed relation.

Deceit or truth? The dead possess the hill
In battlements of Totternhoe or slate;
The view is ours, the range and ache of sight.
If Time serves: in a common space unrolls
This Resurrection field, with sheaves in glory like risen souls.

Anne Barbara Ridler

For A Child Expected

Lovers whose lifted hands are candles in winter,
Whose gentle ways like streams in the easy summer,
Lying together
For secret setting of a child, love what they do,
Thinking they make that candle immortal, those streams
forever flow,
And yet do better than they know.

So the first flutter of a baby felt in the womb,
Its little signal and promise of riches to come,
Is taken in its father's name;
Its life is the body of his love, like his caress,
First delicate and strange, that daily use
Makes dearer and priceless.

Our baby was to be the living sign of our joy,
Restore to each the other's lost infancy;
To a painter's pillaging eye
Poet's coiled hearing, add the heart we might earn
By the help of love; all that our passion would yield
We put to planning our child.

The world flowed in; whatever we liked we took:
For its hair, the gold curls of the November oak
We saw on our walk;
Snowberries that make a Milky Way in the wood
For its tender hands; calm screen of the frozen flood
For our care of its childhood.

But the birth of a child is an uncontrollable glory;
Cat's cradle of hopes will hold no living baby,
Long though it lay quietly.
And when our baby stirs and struggles to be born
It compels humility: what we began
Is now its own.

For as the sun that shines through glass
So Jesus in His Mother was.
Therefore every human creature,

Since it shares in His nature,
In candle gold passion or white
Sharp star should show its own way of light.
May no parental dread or dream
Darken our darling's early beam:
May she grow to her right powers
Unperturbed by passion of ours.

Anne Barbara Ridler

Free Fall

A long while, a long long while it seems:
The bat-winged figure shaking his robe,
The cameras purring.

It is Daedalus the tailor, up on the Eiffel Tower
Ready to fly. The year is 1900;
We watch it, now.

...Shakes at his bat-robe, first to the right,
Then left, then right again, a twitch,
A doubtful gesture.

'Cast thyself from the pinnacle, angels will bear thee up.'
So great a height - the wings will surely beat
And bear me up?

Shaking his robe. A mile of film we are wasting:
Why doesn't he jump? In these long seconds
What is he thinking?

That the plan was crazy, and the careful stitches
Shaped him a shroud? Perhaps he is wondering
How to withdraw.

To pretend a flaw in the work, a change in the wind;
And imagines how it would be to face
The jeering crowd,

Slink back to his trade and live, with nothing to live for.
So still he hesitates, and shakes his shroud,
Then, suddenly, jumps.

Not even a flap from the wings. The lens below
Can barely follow the plummeting shape,
So quick his fall,

Hollowing out his own grave.
We are caught between dismay and laughter
Watching it now -

Not in a myth, not a century back, but now.
Ridiculous death. Yet as he stood on the tower,
Shaking, shaking his robe,

He mimed what each man must in private try,
Poised on the parapet of darkness -
Each in that crowd, and you, reader, and I.

Anne Barbara Ridler

Nothing Is Lost

Nothing is lost.

We are too sad to know that, or too blind;
Only in visited moments do we understand:
It is not that the dead return ---
They are about us always, though unguessed.

This penciled Latin verse

You dying wrote me, ten years past and more,
Brings you as much alive to me as the self you wrote it for,
Dear father, as I read your words
With no word but Alas.

Lines in a letter, lines in a face
Are the faithful currents of life: the boy has written
His parents across his forehead, and as we burn
Our bodies up each seven years,
His own past self has left no plainer trace.

Nothing dies.

The cells pass on their secrets, we betray them
Unknowingly: in a freckle, in the way
We walk, recall some ancestor,
And Adam in the color of our eyes.

Yes, on the face of the new born,
Before the soul has taken full possession,
There pass, as over a screen, in succession
The images of other beings:
Face after face looks out, and then is gone.

Nothing is lost, for all in love survive.
I lay my cheek against his sleeping limbs
To feel if he is warm, and touch in him
Those children whom no shawl could warm,
No arms, no grief, no longing could revive.

Thus what we see, or know,
Is only a tiny portion, at the best,
Of the life in which we share; an iceberg's crest

Our sunlit present, our partial sense,
With deep supporting multitudes below.

Anne Barbara Ridler

Poem For A Christmas Broadcast

Woman s Voice

Perhaps you find the angel most improbable?
It spoke to men asleep, their minds ajar
For once to admit the entrance of a stranger.
Few have heard voices, but all have made a journey:
The mind moves, desiring dedication,
Desiring to lay its gifts, as a dog its bone,
At the feet of the first creation. 'Take it or leave it'
Says pride, 'You made it; You must bear the blame.'
But secretly the heart 'O make it good.'
'Either God acts in vain, or this is God.'

1st King

Melchior brings gold. O teach me to give,
For this was infancy's first love:
Its first possession; its adult passion
O new creation
Take my treasure and make me free.

2nd King

Caspar, incense: all that is strange,
Oblique, projected beyond the range
Of the First Person. Such mediation
O new creation
Take, that we dare the direct sight.

3rd, King

Death is a strong wish. Balthasar
Brings his desire in a gift of myrrh ;
Seeking perfection in pain and cessation
O new creation
Die for me, make me desire to live.

All Three

Mary, who nourished glory on human kindness
By springs of power hidden from the mind,
Here is our small self-knowledge, now
Make it acceptable, or teach us how.

Mary

He will accept it, never fear,
For his audacity is my despair.
O do not give what he should not bear.
His boldness is beyond belief,
His threats, his lightnings, his short grief.
Is it divine or mortal confidence?
Mortal ignorance, godlike innocence.
Brazen, he takes love as a right;
He knows to demand is to give delight.
Youngling, here we offer love
What have we to offer but love?
And what is our love? Greed and despair.
O do not take what you should not bear,
Or tainted love by true convince:
Let us not harm you, helpless Prince.
Sin is the chance of mercy;
Then even sin contrives your greater glory.

Anne Barbara Ridler

The Cranes

We thought they were gulls at first,
while they were distant-
The two cranes flying out of a natural morning,
They circled twice about our house and sank,
Their long legs drooping, down over the wood.
We saw their wings flash white,
Frayed at the black tip,
And heard their harsh cry, like a rusty screw.

Down in the next field, shy and angular,
They darted their long necks in the grass for fish.
They would not have us close, but shambled coyly,
Ridiculous, caught on the ground. Yet our fields
Under their feet became a fen: the sky
That was blue July became watery November,
And echoing with the cries of foreign birds.

Anne Barbara Ridler

The Spring Equinox

Now is the pause between asleep and awake:
Two seasons take
A colour and quality each from each as yet.
The new stage-set
Spandril, column and fan of spring is raised against the
winter backdrop
Murrey and soft;
Now aloft
The sun swings on the equinoctial line.
Few flowers yet shine:
The hellebore hangs a clear green bell and opulent leaves
above dark mould;
The light is cold
In arum leaves, and a primrose flickers
Here and there; the first cool bird-song flickers in the thicket.
Clouds arc pale as the pollen from willows;
March fallows are white with lime like frost.

This is the pause between asleep and awake:
The pause of contemplation and of peace,
Before the earth must teem and the heart ache.
This is the child's pause, before it sees
That the choice of one way has denied the other ;
Must choose the either, or both, of to care and not to care;
Before the light or darkness shall discover
Irreparable loss; before it must take
Blame for the creature caught in the necessary snare:
Receiving a profit, before it holds a snare.

Anne Barbara Ridler