

**Classic Poetry Series**

# **Hugh Sykes Davies**

## **- poems -**

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# Hugh Sykes Davies(1909-1984)

Hugh Sykes Davies was an English poet, novelist and communist who was one of a small group of 1930s British surrealists.

Davies was born in Yorkshire to a Methodist minister and his wife. He went to Kingswood School, Bath and studied at Cambridge University, where he co-edited a student magazine called Experiment with William Empson. He spent some time in Paris during the 1930s. He was to stand as a communist candidate in the 1940 general election, but the vote was cancelled because of World War II. He was one of the organisers of the London International Surrealist Exhibition in 1936.

He had a talent for friendship, and as well as Empson, he numbered <a href="http://www.poemhunter.com/thomas-stearns-eliot/">T. S. Eliot</a>, I. A. Richards, Anthony Blunt, <a href="http://www.poemhunter.com/ludwig-wittgenstein/">Wittgenstein</a> and Salvador Dalí amongst his circle. At one stage he had <a href="http://www.poemhunter.com/malcolm-lowry/">Malcolm Lowry</a> declared his ward in an attempt to stop Lowry's drinking.

Davies' poems were mostly published in avant garde magazines and were not collected during his lifetime. His novels include Full Fathom Five (1956) and The Papers of Andrew Melmoth (1960). He also wrote Petron (1935).

He was a University Lecturer and Fellow of St. John's College, Cambridge.

# Decline Of Phæthon

i 40-Phæthon's  
leash more suns  
for caravan  
with your body's-span  
more zodiac's bears  
than eye unbars  
show-crabs and goats  
than telescopes  
yet must decline  
in rounded time  
of 40 suns  
I, — Phæthon's!

and suffer this preferment  
because you pierce dreams  
because you overhang  
night's snarl with body's-fang  
see where my blood  
streams  
in the firmament

Experiment, No. 3 (May 1929), 39.

Hugh Sykes Davies

# Music In An Empty House

The house was empty and

the people of the house

gone many months

### Months for the weevil

for the patient worm

timber-mole softly tunnelling

for the parliament of rats

Footsteps slink past

[illegible]

down

[illegible]

corridors

## Slow feet

        warily scuff

bare boards

## The much-bitten

[illegible]

holds

[illegible]

moth

In a certain curtain'd room

the halting steps evade

[illegible]

## To twitch the winding-sheet

around a grand piano

thin phalanx of sound

sharp rat's teeth edge yellow

with decay

The much-bitten

[illegible]

holds

             many

moth

## On rat's teeth-edge

[illegible]

hesitate

Then falling send

   as tenantry

darnp-muffled chords

## rusting strings

   a still-born song

Their
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fortissimo		The tattered
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| scarce |  |  |

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width=20></td><td align=left>holds</td></tr><tr><td
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 near |  |  |

align=left>many</td></tr>
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 cobwebs |  |  |

align=left>moths</td></tr></table>
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# Hugh Sykes Davies

## Poem ('in The Stump Of The Old Tree...')

In the stump of the old tree, where the heart has rotted out, there is a hole the length of a man's arm, and a dank pool at the bottom of it where the rain gathers, and the old leaves turn into lacy skeletons. But do not put your hand down to see, because

in the stumps of old trees, where the hearts have rotted out, there are holes the length of a man's arm, and dank pools at the bottom where the rain gathers and old leaves turn to lace, and the beak of a dead bird gapes like a trap. But do not put your hand down to see, because

in the stumps of old trees with rotten hearts, where the rain gathers and the laced leaves and the dead bird like a trap, there are holes the length of a man's arm, and in every crevice of the rotten wood grow weasel's eyes like molluscs, their lids open and shut with the tide. But do not put your hand down to see, because

in the stumps of old trees where the rain gathers and the trapped leaves and the beak and the laced weasel's eyes, there are holes the length of a man's arm, and at the bottom a sodden bible written in the language of rooks. But do not put your hand down to see, because

in the stumps of old trees where the hearts have rotted out there are holes the length of a man's arm where the weasels are trapped and the letters of the rook language are laced on the sodden leaves, and at the bottom there is a man's arm. But do not put your hand down to see, because

in the stumps of old trees where the hearts have rotted out there are deep holes and dank pools where the rain gathers, and if you ever put your hand down to see, you can wipe it in the sharp grass till it bleeds, but you'll never want to eat with it again.

Contemporary Poetry and Prose, 7 (Nov. 1936), 129.

Hugh Sykes Davies

## Poem ('it Doesn't Look Like A Finger...')

It doesn't look like a finger it looks like a feather of broken glass  
It doesn't look like something to eat it looks like something eaten  
It doesn't look like an empty chair it looks like an old woman

searching in a heap of stones

It doesn't look like a heap of stones it looks like an estuary where  
the drifting filth is swept to and fro on the tide

It doesn't look like a finger it looks like a feather with broken teeth  
The spaces between the stones are made of stone

It doesn't look like a revolver it looks like a convolvulus

It doesn't look like a living convolvulus it looks like a dead one

KEEP YOUR FILTHY HANDS OFF MY FRIENDS USE THEM ON

YOUR BITCHES OR

YOURSELVES BUT KEEP THEM OFF MY FRIENDS

The faces between the stones are made of bone

It doesn't look like an eye it looks like a bowl of rotten fruit

It doesn't look like my mother in the garden it looks like my father  
when he came up from the sea covered in shells and tangle

It doesn't look like a feather it looks like a finger with broken wings

It doesn't look like the old woman's mouth it looks like a handful  
of broken feathers or a revolver buried in cinders

The faces beneath the stones are made of stone

It doesn't look like a broken cup it looks like a cut lip

It doesn't look like yours it looks like mine

BUT IT IS YOURS NOW

SOON IT WILL LOOK LIKE YOURS

AND ANYTHING YOU SEE WILL BE USED AGAINST YOU

London Bulletin, No. 2 (May 1938), 7.

# Hugh Sykes Davies

# Sententiæ

If the father's bankrupt, and the sons fail,  
Blaming it on their own bad start,  
Say the father should have gone to gaol,  
Forgetting their grandfather's part.

So with all centuries of blame  
Fathers by their children cursed,  
Say that all the trouble came  
From Eve and Adam first.

Both wrong: are wronged. But we are wronged  
the most.  
Their life was deep, but only deep, immersed.  
We fathom further, deep enough to boast  
We know a worse beneath our father's worst.

Cambridge Review, 52/1290 (10 June 1931), 493.

Hugh Sykes Davies