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.


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
damp walls
down
long
corridors

Slow feet
warily scuff
bare boards
The much-bitten
tapestry
holds
many
moths

In a certain curtain’d room
the halting steps evade
chairs white shrouded

To twitch the winding-sheet
around a grand piano
thin phalanx of sound
sharp rat’s teeth edge yellow
with decay

The much-bitten
tapestry
holds
many
moths
On rat's teeth-edge

Then falling send

Their fortissimo

Hugh Sykes Davies
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  


Hugh Sykes Davies
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