

**Classic Poetry Series**

**Laurie Lee**  
**- poems -**

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## Laurie Lee(1914 - 1997)

Though many biographies say that Laurie Lee was born in Slad, his family seems to have moved there when he was three. This move affected him a lot and has been written about in great detail many many years later in *Cider with Rosie* "I was set down from the carrier's cart at the age of three; and there with a sense of bewilderment and terror my life in the village began.

The June grass, amongst which I stood, was taller than I was, and I wept. I had never been so close to grass before. It towered above me and all around me, each blade tattooed with tiger-skins of sunlight. It was knife-edged, dark, and a wicked green, thick as a forest and alive with grasshoppers that chirped and chattered and leapt through the air like monkeys. I was lost and didn't know where to move. A tropic heat oozed up from the ground, rank with sharp odours of roots and nettles. Snow-clouds of elder-blossom banked in the sky, showering upon me the fumes and flakes of their sweet and giddy suffocation. High overhead ran frenzied larks, screaming, as though the sky were tearing apart."

The autobiographical *Cider with Rosie* which is his most famous work, contains vivid records of his memories of his childhood in Slad before the arrival of the motorcar, including his school days. Laurie Lee studied at the village school and later went to Stroud Central School.

At fifteen he left school and became an errand-boy. Lee also gave lectures on the violin. When he was twenty he left Slad for London to earn his living.

He then spent four years travelling in Spain and the eastern Mediterranean. There he travelled on foot, playing his fiddle to earn his keep. Later, in December 1937, he joined the International Brigades to fight in the the Spanish Civil War, but after having a medical he was declared to be "physically weak" and was sent home.

His Spanish experiences resulted in the pre Civil War book *As I walked Out One Midsummer Morning* (1969) and the book considered by some to be his best work, *A Moment of War* (1991), a spare, unsentimental memoir of his experience as a volunteer in the Spanish Civil War.

Before devoting himself entirely to writing in 1951, Lee worked as a journalist and as a scriptwriter. In the Second World War he made documentary films for the General Post Office (1939-40), Crown Film Unit (1941-43) and the Ministry of Information (1944-46).

During the war he also worked for the Ministry of Information. From 1944 to 1946 he worked as an editor at the Ministry of Information Publications. From 1950 to 1951 he was caption-writer-in-chief for the Festival of Britain, for which service he was awarded the MBE in 1952.

His *Cider with Rosie* was an immediate best-seller, reaching a wide public with its images of village life from a bygone era of innocence and simplicity. With its success Lee could buy his childhood home in Slad.

His first love though, was always poetry though he was only moderately successful as a poet. His first poem Lee's first poem appeared in *Horizon* in 1940 and he published his first volume of poems, *The Sun My Monument* in 1944. This was followed by *The Bloom of Candles* (1947) and *My Many Coated Man* (1955). Several poems written in the early 1940s reflect the atmosphere of the war, but also capture the beauty of the English countryside.

Other works have included *A Rose for Winter*, about a trip he made to Andalusia 15 years after the Civil War, and *Two Women* (1983) was a story of Lee's courtship of his wife Cathy, and the birth and growth of their daughter Jessy.

Lee also wrote travel books, essays, a radio play, short stories. He received several awards, including the Atlantic Award (1944), Society of Authors travelling award (1951), M.B.E. (Member, Order of the British Empire), William Foyle Poetry Prize (1956), W.H. Smith and Son Award (1960).

Laurie Lee returned to Slad to live in his childhood home, with his wife Cathy in the early 1960s and remained until his death on May 14, 1997, at the age of 83. He is buried in the local churchyard.

# Apples

Behold the apples' rounded worlds:  
juice-green of July rain,  
the black polestar of flowers, the rind  
mapped with its crimson stain.

The russet, crab and cottage red  
burn to the sun's hot brass,  
then drop like sweat from every branch  
and bubble in the grass.

They lie as wanton as they fall,  
and where they fall and break,  
the stallion clamps his crunching jaws,  
the starling stabs his beak.

In each plump gourd the cidery bite  
of boys' teeth tears the skin;  
the waltzing wasp consumes his share,  
the bent worm enters in.

I, with as easy hunger, take  
entire my season's dole;  
welcome the ripe, the sweet, the sour,  
the hollow and the whole.

Laurie Lee

# April Rise

If ever I saw blessing in the air  
I see it now in this still early day  
Where lemon-green the vaporous morning drips  
Wet sunlight on the powder of my eye.

Blown bubble-film of blue, the sky wraps round  
Weeds of warm light whose every root and rod  
Splutters with soapy green, and all the world  
Sweats with the bead of summer in its bud.

If ever I heard blessing it is there  
Where birds in trees that shoals and shadows are  
Splash with their hidden wings and drops of sound  
Break on my ears their crests of throbbing air.

Pure in the haze the emerald sun dilates,  
The lips of sparrows milk the mossy stones,  
While white as water by the lake a girl  
Swims her green hand among the gathered swans.

Now, as the almond burns its smoking wick,  
Dropping small flames to light the candled grass;  
Now, as my low blood scales its second chance,  
If ever world were blessed, now it is.

Laurie Lee

# Christmas Landscape

Tonight the wind gnaws  
With teeth of glass,  
The jackdaw shivers  
In caged branches of iron,  
The stars have talons.

There is hunger in the mouth  
Of vole and badger,  
Silver agonies of breath  
In the nostril of the fox,  
Ice on the rabbit's paw.

Tonight has no moon,  
No food for the pilgrim;  
The fruit tree is bare,  
The rose bush a thorn  
And the ground is bitter with stones.

But the mole sleeps, and the hedgehog  
Lies curled in a womb of leaves,  
The bean and the wheat-seed  
Hug their germs in the earth  
And the stream moves under the ice.

Tonight there is no moon,  
But a new star opens  
Like a silver trumpet over the dead.  
Tonight in a nest of ruins  
The blessed babe is laid.  
And the fir tree warms to a bloom of candles,  
And the child lights his lantern,  
Stares at his tinsel toy;  
And our hearts and hearths  
Smoulder with live ashes.

In the blood of our grief  
The cold earth is suckled,  
In our agony the womb  
Convulses its seed;

In the first cry of anguish  
The child's first breath is born.

Laurie Lee

# Home From Abroad

Far-fetched with tales of other worlds and ways,  
My skin well-oiled with wines of the Levant,  
I set my face into a filial smile  
To greet the pale, domestic kiss of Kent.

But shall I never learn? That gawky girl,  
Recalled so primly in my foreign thoughts,  
Becomes again the green-haired queen of love  
Whose wanton form dilates as it delights.

Her rolling tidal landscape floods the eye  
And drowns Chianti in a dusky stream;  
The flower-flecked grasses swim with simple horses,  
The hedges choke with roses fat as cream.

So do I breathe the hayblown airs of home,  
And watch the sea-green elms drip birds and shadows,  
And as the twilight nets the plunging sun  
My heart's keel slides to rest among the meadows.

Laurie Lee

# Milkmaid

The girl's far treble, muted to the heat,  
calls like a fainting bird across the fields  
to where her flock lies panting for her voice,  
their black horns buried deep in marigolds.

They climb awake, like drowsy butterflies,  
and press their red flanks through the tall branched grass,  
and as they go their wandering tongues embrace  
the vacant summer mirrored in their eyes.

Led to the limestone shadows of a barn  
they snuff their past embalmed in the hay,  
while her cool hand, cupped to the udder's fount,  
distils the brimming harvest of their day.

Look what a cloudy cream the earth gives out,  
fat juice of buttercups and meadow-rye;  
the girl dreams milk within her body's field  
and hears, far off, her muted children cry.

Laurie Lee

# The Long War For Peace Day

Less passionate the long war throws  
its burning thorn about all men,  
caught in one grief, we share one wound,  
and cry one dialect of pain.

We have forgot who fired the house  
Whose easy mischief spilled first blood  
Under one raging roof we lie  
The fault no longer understood  
But as our twisted arms embrace the desert where our cities stood  
Death's family likeness in each face must show at last our brotherhood.

Laurie Lee

# Town Owl

On eves of cold, when slow coal fires,  
rooted in basements, burn and branch,  
brushing with smoke the city air;  
When quartered moons pale in the sky,  
and neons glow along the dark  
like deadly nightshade on a briar;  
Above the muffled traffic then  
I hear the owl, and at his note  
I shudder in my private chair.  
For like an auger he has come  
to roost among our crumbling walls,  
his blooded talons sheathed in fur.  
Some secret lure of time it seems  
has called him from his country wastes  
to hunt a newer wasteland here.  
And where the candlabra swung  
bright with the dancers' thousand eyes,  
now his black, hooded pupils stare,  
And where the silk-shoed lovers ran  
with dust of diamonds in their hair,  
he opens now his silent wing,  
And, like a stroke of doom, drops down,  
and swoops across the empty hall,  
and plucks a quick mouse off the stair...

Laurie Lee

# Winter Poem

Tonight the wind gnaws with teeth of glass  
The jackdaw shivers in caged branches of iron  
The stars have talons  
There is hunger in the mouth of vole and badger  
Silver agonies of breath in the nostril of the fox  
Ice on the rabbit's paw  
Tonight has no moon, no food for the pilgrim  
The fruit tree is bare, the rose bush a thorn  
And the ground is bitter with stones  
But the mole sleeps and the hedgehog lies curled in a womb of leaves  
And the bean and the wheat seed hug their germs in the earth  
And a stream moves under the ice  
Tonight there is no moon  
But a star opens like a trumpet over the dead  
And tonight in a nest of ruins the blessed babe is laid  
And the fir tree warms to a bloom of candles  
And the child lights his lantern and stares at his tinsel toy  
And our hearts and hearths smoulder with live ashes  
In the blood of our grief the cold earth is suckled  
In our agony the womb convulses its seed  
And in the last cry of anguish  
The child's first breath is born

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