

Classic Poetry Series

St John of the Cross
- poems -

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St John of the Cross(1542 - 1591)

St. John of the Cross stands as one of the most important mystical philosophers in Christian history. He was born at Hontoveros, Old Castile, 24 June, 1542; died at Ubeda, Andalusia, 14 Dec., 1591. The son of poor silk weavers of Toledo, John was born Juan de Yepes y Alvarez in Fontiveros. John's father died when the boy was quite young, leaving his mother, a member of a lower social class, to raise him alone. John was sent to the poor school at Medina del Campo, whither the family had gone to live, and proved an attentive and diligent pupil; but when apprenticed to an artisan, he seemed incapable of learning anything.

Thereupon the governor of the hospital of Medina took him into his service, and for seven years John divided his time between waiting on the poorest of the poor, and frequenting a school established by the Jesuits. He entered the Carmelite Order in 1563, continuing his studies at the University of Salamanca, where he began to teach while still a student. After being ordained in 1567, John met St. Teresa of Avila, another of the great mystics of the Christian tradition.

Following Teresa's lead in attempting to reform his Order, John, in 1568, initiated a very severe form of monasticism in a tiny farmhouse. These monks went so far as to go barefoot, indicating their commitment to poverty, lending to them the appellation of "Discalced" or "shoeless." Over time, a rift arose between the traditional Carmelites and John's Discalced Carmelites, leading in 1576 to John's arrest and imprisonment. During this period of imprisonment, John wrote much of the poetry that would provide his greatest contribution to later generations.

Eventually, the rights of the Discalceds were recognized, and John took on various roles of leadership within the order. After some fifteen years of leadership, he died in 1591, leaving behind a number of remarkable works of Christian mysticism: Ascent of Mount Carmel, Dark Night of the Soul, and the Spiritual Canticle of the Soul.

The Spiritual Canticle

I

THE BRIDE

Where have You hidden Yourself,
And abandoned me in my groaning, O my Beloved?
You have fled like the hart,
Having wounded me.
I ran after You, crying; but You were gone.

II

O shepherds, you who go
Through the sheepcots up the hill,
If you shall see Him
Whom I love the most,
Tell Him I languish, suffer, and die.

III

In search of my Love
I will go over mountains and strands;
I will gather no flowers,
I will fear no wild beasts;
And pass by the mighty and the frontiers.

IV

O groves and thickets
Planted by the hand of the Beloved;
O verdant meads
Enameled with flowers,
Tell me, has He passed by you?

V

ANSWER OF THE CREATURES

A thousand graces diffusing
He passed through the groves in haste,
And merely regarding them
As He passed
Clothed them with His beauty.

VI

THE BRIDE

Oh! who can heal me?
Give me at once Yourself,
Send me no more
A messenger
Who cannot tell me what I wish.

VII

All they who serve are telling me
Of Your unnumbered graces;
And all wound me more and more,
And something leaves me dying,
I know not what, of which they are darkly speaking.

VIII

But how you persevere, O life,
Not living where you live;
The arrows bring death
Which you receive
From your conceptions of the Beloved.

IX

Why, after wounding
This heart, have You not healed it?
And why, after stealing it,
Have You thus abandoned it,
And not carried away the stolen prey?

X

Quench my troubles,
For no one else can soothe them;
And let my eyes behold You,
For You are their light,
And I will keep them for You alone.

XI

Reveal Your presence,
And let the vision and Your beauty kill me,
Behold the malady
Of love is incurable

Except in Your presence and before Your face.

XII

O crystal well!
Oh that on Your silvered surface
You would mirror forth at once
Those eyes desired
Which are outlined in my heart!

XIII

Turn them away, O my Beloved!
I am on the wing:

THE BRIDEGROOM

Return, My Dove!
The wounded hart
Looms on the hill
In the air of your flight and is refreshed.

XIV

My Beloved is the mountains,
The solitary wooded valleys,
The strange islands,
The roaring torrents,
The whisper of the amorous gales;

XV

The tranquil night
At the approaches of the dawn,
The silent music,
The murmuring solitude,
The supper which revives, and enkindles love.

XVI

Catch us the foxes,
For our vineyard has flourished;
While of roses
We make a nosegay,
And let no one appear on the hill.

XVII

O killing north wind, cease!
Come, south wind, that awakens love!
Blow through my garden,
And let its odors flow,
And the Beloved shall feed among the flowers.

XVIII

O nymphs of Judea!
While amid the flowers and the rose-trees
The amber sends forth its perfume,
Tarry in the suburbs,
And touch not our thresholds.

XIX

Hide yourself, O my Beloved!
Turn Your face to the mountains,
Do not speak,
But regard the companions
Of her who is traveling amidst strange islands.

XX

THE BRIDEGROOM

Light-winged birds,
Lions, fawns, bounding does,
Mountains, valleys, strands,
Waters, winds, heat,
And the terrors that keep watch by night;

XXI

By the soft lyres
And the siren strains, I adjure you,
Let your fury cease,
And touch not the wall,
That the bride may sleep in greater security.

XXII

The bride has entered
The pleasant and desirable garden,
And there reposes to her heart's content;
Her neck reclining
On the sweet arms of the Beloved.

XXIII

Beneath the apple-tree
There were you betrothed;
There I gave you My hand,
And you were redeemed
Where your mother was corrupted.

XXIV

THE BRIDE

Our bed is of flowers
By dens of lions encompassed,
Hung with purple,
Made in peace,
And crowned with a thousand shields of gold.

XXV

In Your footsteps
The young ones run Your way;
At the touch of the fire
And by the spiced wine,
The divine balsam flows.

XXVI

In the inner cellar
Of my Beloved have I drunk; and when I went forth
Over all the plain
I knew nothing,
And lost the flock I followed before.

XXVII

There He gave me His breasts,
There He taught me the science full of sweetness.
And there I gave to Him
Myself without reserve;
There I promised to be His bride.

XXVIII

My soul is occupied,
And all my substance in His service;
Now I guard no flock,

Nor have I any other employment:
My sole occupation is love.

XXIX

If, then, on the common land
I am no longer seen or found,
You will say that I am lost;
That, being enamored,
I lost myself; and yet was found.

XXX

Of emeralds, and of flowers
In the early morning gathered,
We will make the garlands,
Flowering in Your love,
And bound together with one hair of my head.

XXXI

By that one hair
You have observed fluttering on my neck,
And on my neck regarded,
You were captivated;
And wounded by one of my eyes.

XXXII

When You regarded me,
Your eyes imprinted in me Your grace:
For this You loved me again,
And thereby my eyes merited
To adore what in You they saw

XXXIII

Despise me not,
For if I was swarthy once
You can regard me now;
Since You have regarded me,
Grace and beauty have You given me.

XXXIV

THE BRIDEGROOM

The little white dove

Has returned to the ark with the bough;
And now the turtle-dove
Its desired mate
On the green banks has found.

XXXV

In solitude she lived,
And in solitude built her nest;
And in solitude, alone
Has the Beloved guided her,
In solitude also wounded with love.

XXXVI

THE BRIDE

Let us rejoice, O my Beloved!
Let us go forth to see ourselves in Your beauty,
To the mountain and the hill,
Where the pure water flows:
Let us enter into the heart of the thicket.

XXXVII

We shall go at once
To the deep caverns of the rock
Which are all secret,
There we shall enter in
And taste of the new wine of the pomegranate.

XXXVIII

There you will show me
That which my soul desired;
And there You will give at once,
O You, my life!
That which You gave me the other day.

XXXIX

The breathing of the air,
The song of the sweet nightingale,
The grove and its beauty
In the serene night,
With the flame that consumes, and gives no pains.

XL

None saw it;

Neither did Aminadab appear

The siege was intermitted,

And the cavalry dismounted

At the sight of the waters.

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