

*Ann Shirley*

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POEMS

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ROGER HUNTER

To Joyce  
with love

## Childhood

First-known things are best,  
a rocky inlet facing west  
hissing with dissolving spray  
frames a sun-splashed holiday.  
First-known things are best.

First-known things are clear,  
the river foaming at the weir,  
the farm within a cycle ride,  
the golden mountain's graceful side.  
First-known things are clear.

First-known things delight,  
sliding on a winter's night,  
picnics by the beechwood's shore  
and woods and woods still to explore.  
First-known things delight.

First-known things appal,  
beware the shadow in the hall,  
her illness I can't understand,  
his sudden death beneath the sand.  
First-known things appal.

First-known things are true,  
houses with a river view  
where I could play with you and you,  
tip-cat by the garden gate  
and summer suns descending late.  
First-known things are true.

*for S. and N. Martin*

## December, 1965

In that dark hour you came with me  
and stayed,  
    each moment closely counted,  
my life a trickling water,  
    quicksilver-restless turning seeking forward  
then night interminable night  
wandering lost over the cliffs of nowhere  
    yet every morning  
you came your hands brimming  
    with life's renewal  
this you did for me  
    so I must find myself  
    something more true more worthy  
to match your sacrifice  
    your long endeavour

and what is love besides that magic bond  
that keeps us close despite all we endure  
before we sleep I stretch to feel her hand  
and close the gap to make the night secure

let me not use her but enjoy her worth  
she is the face that nature turns to me  
bright Demeter whose storms ravage the earth  
we sit together while she pours my tea



### May Day, 1937

On that far distant first of May  
when marriage vows were countersigned  
we entered our united way

that we our promises obey  
each of us swore those oaths that bind  
on that far distant first of May

forsaking others we must stay  
held by the love that lies enshrined  
within our still united way

our bodies must at last decay  
our souls remain and will remind  
us of that distant first of May

that wedding seems just yesterday  
when we were marked as predestined  
to follow that united way

in spite of what the world may say  
we do not find that love is blind  
so celebrate that first of May  
and follow our united way.

### Medusa

The deep commodious pool  
rock-rimmed  
rises and falls  
with water surging  
glinting in the sun  
within its walls  
it holds and concentrates  
the sudden overpowering sea  
there in the cool  
translucent blue  
the jelly-fish floats gently  
idly free  
her tendrils stretch towards me  
close above  
I meet that petrifying gaze  
subtly transmuted into love

Searching the woods  
for the cherry tree  
red petals in the dark  
patches of blood vermillion  
concentrated fires  
glowing like myriad eyes  
that burn and flare to deck  
the consecrated tree.

Later the dawn  
reveals a garden scene  
the shrub of excellence  
white-flowered camellia  
holds up its blooms like lamps  
full moons upon the shrine  
sacred to love that will be  
and has ever been.

### Bifrons

The park lies still beneath the trees,  
bright yellow of the aconites  
and deep-blue violets with their heart-shaped leaves  
herald the spring's delights.

The path that leads down to the lake  
is almost overgrown with briars,  
this was the way the Marchioness would take  
to light her picnic fires

beside the antique summer house,  
now ruined, by the waterfall,  
then row with friends in the flat-bottomed scow  
that rots beside the wall.

Of her, the King's good friend, nothing is found,  
while sempiternal spring renews the ground.

At dusk when moisture gathers on the stones  
and statues glimmer whitely in the park  
across the valley with its smell of bones  
the severed head is singing in the dark

when Rousseau lived beneath the snow-clad Alps  
he learnt the game that Venus played with Mars  
instructed with Louise de Warens' help  
no more to scan black gaps between the stars

requited passion brings a transient peace  
as scent of flowers sweetens the night air  
and yet galactic mysteries do not cease  
to taunt the mind which overwrought with care  
struggles to find a channel to release  
the flooding that overcomes despair

### In Memoriam — Maurice Colbourne

Quiet autumnal day the air is still  
the misty sun  
still hot but waning moves  
across the trees  
a sudden shaft of light  
dazzles the pond  
where fish pursue  
patterns of a quest that never ends  
I sit where friendship once was valid  
where stones  
laid with his expert care  
unbroken ring unbreakable  
circle the pool and say  
"This is a place for grateful memory"  
the light reflects  
the good the true  
I find  
death and life  
next year's conception an epiphany



### La Santa Sindone

The face that stares out from the Shroud  
reveals the final mystery,  
God's face, compassionate yet proud,

who on his throne above the clouds  
will judge us on that wrathful day,  
yes, he who stares out from the Shroud,

that day on which all cry aloud  
"O Virgin, intercede for me  
with God, compassionate yet proud".

On that Good Friday through the crowd  
you trod the way to Calvary  
alive, not staring from a shroud,

with body bloody but unbowed  
you later rose triumphantly,  
your face compassionate yet proud.

To all who have allegiance vowed  
you promise life eternally,  
you who stare out from the Shroud,  
you, God, compassionate yet proud.

The early chestnut tree  
starts to unfurl its sticky buds  
in palest green.  
Speedwell again  
scatters the grassy banks  
with points of quivering blue  
mixed with the purple and the white  
of chickweed and dead-nettle.  
Mary and Joseph lungwort  
and first daffodils  
stand side by side  
and yellow groundsel  
shows its dull colour  
close to the bright celandines.  
Down by the bridge  
a clump of bitter cress  
raise tiny standards  
of starry white beside the stream  
that dominates my dreams,  
current varying like the moon,  
so recently dried up  
now flooding through.  
By the brimming lake  
the coltsfoot's golden petals  
open under the tasselled alder trees  
and in the glade  
a pair of yellow butterflies  
twist and hover in the sun,  
votaries of Aphrodite,  
flower-clad goddess at the heart  
of each and every one.

### **Portstewart Strand**

by the headland  
under a setting sun  
the relentless waves of Mananaan  
sweep one by one  
to the yellow sand  
the rising tide shines with a bloody glare  
and curlews' cry vibrates  
through heather-heavy air  
all things become themselves  
while I remain inside  
locked in an antique dream  
of a youth and his magic bride  
Tuagh with the yellow hair  
and how in the wave she died

### **Thoughts from Albi**

On this autumn day  
the earth is fresh and beautiful  
new-born from the night,  
yet created, some say,  
by the god of darkness,  
evil face of a dual deity,  
Janus of dark and light  
from whose hold  
the soul must purge itself.  
But the deep charm  
of finely-balanced Nature,  
blue sky, bright sun and stillness  
framed with falling leaves  
makes such strange thoughts  
seem odd, bizarre, hard to believe.

The wind of God blows all things clear  
whirling down from airy space  
it joins in one the far and near

and not just in the mental sphere  
a spirit wind that works through faith  
God's wind that bloweth all things clear

but a real wind that you can hear  
and feel it buffeting your face  
joining in one the far and near

let us then grasp this without fear  
that mind and body can embrace  
the wind of God that blows all clear

obverse and reverse front and rear  
so vital for the human race  
to join in one the far and near

your thoughts and feelings both revere  
mythologize the commonplace  
and use God's wind to make all clear  
and join in one the far and near.



### Elizabethan Concert at All Saints', Boughton Aluph

The setting sun  
fades in the west window  
to a pale lingering light  
while below  
the counter-tenor's voice  
soars pure and flawless  
in antique melodies.  
Night sweeps in from the east,  
the stained glass  
goes blank, and the nave lights  
glow golden underneath  
lighting the Decorated tracery,  
a nest of snakes  
writhing in coils like icing  
squeezed upon a cake.  
Music of viols and lutes  
brings to a momentous close  
memories of the triumphs of the Tudor Rose.

*(in memory of Alfred Deller)*

### Bridge Flower Festival

Flowers arranged around the walls  
in pink and white and vivid red  
bring beauty to each window space  
between the tablets to the dead,

the sun shines through the new-cleaned glass  
spreading an iridescent glow  
across the chancel and altar rails  
dappling all that lies below

the tapering pillars of scarlet blooms  
that flank the altar on either side.  
Above the tablet that notes the death  
of Sir Arnold Braem's bride

Cornelius Jansen's portrait surveys  
the dazzling scene, and underneath  
Macobus Casey's divided tomb,  
sundered in two, mirrors the grief

of Ireland, the land from which he came,  
while from France there are two  
memorials, one with a Proustian ring,  
the late Baron Montesquiou,

the other Amelius Sicard,  
Huguenot doctor of long ago.  
The flowers confront these monuments  
and query our final overthrow,

they keep a vigil in the night  
when everyone has gone away  
and hold their colours through the fading light  
with promise of a resurrection day.



Bird against the moon  
free floating on easy wing  
you leisurely turn  
towards the darkening woods  
through which the still-fiery sunset burns.

“What is then your life,  
birth, rearing of young, and death,  
eating and sleeping,  
an unending struggle, some delight  
when the warm sun is shining?”

“That is not my way,  
life can be lived as it comes  
in whatever form.  
Effort and stillness are one,  
as time dies so it is reborn,

high rests upon low,  
light cannot shine without dark,  
late apart from soon,  
do not call me fortunate or sad,  
not good or bad, just gently say—  
‘Bird against the moon’.”

### Wymondham Abbey

Low clouds darken the sky,  
in gathering dusk the twin towers  
still strive against each other, stark  
immense, forsaking elegance, with walls  
smooth and square, summits so flat  
cut-off unfinished waiting for the dark  
when ghostly builders each night recal  
their once so bitter rivalry.

Benedictine Albini laid it down  
as church for both priory and town.  
East and West, so Pope Innocent  
assigned to each their part, in vain,  
dissension grew, in Maniote or Tuscan style  
the towers thrust up competing battlements  
that ended incomplete, never to attain  
final supremacy, ultimate renown.

A blank wall sundered the two sides,  
and now against that wall a miracle,  
the God descends in Danäe's shower of gold,  
below the roof the gilded eagles' wings  
open in triumph above a surging throng  
of saints ascending striving to enfold  
the crowned Madonna and her child, the reredos sings  
in glowing colours to the heavenly bride.

That building dominates the scene  
from every angle. Crooked fir trees  
in the churchyard twist against the misty sky.  
As you depart a clear image remains  
of benediction, of a hand raised  
in secret gesture against the evil eye.  
The mind, thoughtful and quiet, retains  
the memory of all those stones have seen  
caught as in the confines of a dream.

Forces of good and evil strive  
around us from our infancy  
following us until we die

each cradled birth emits a cry  
of mingled joy and fear to see  
those good and evil forces strive

the echoing years around us fly  
and pull us towards eternity  
following us until we die

under the wide arch of the sky  
exist discarnate entities  
who with the evil forces strive

and the Self within me lies  
inside yet separate from me  
and follows me until I die

to recognise it could suffice  
to catch our true identity  
though good and evil forces strive  
following us until we die.

## Candlemas

Queen of Heaven,  
is your distant smile  
tranquil and true  
meant for us as well?

One with your son  
enfolded in your arms,  
may you also  
live in everyone.

The one in all  
and all in each thing  
is the centre  
of all our knowing.

The tall candles  
massed around your shrine  
purify you with  
eternal light.

So let it be  
on this holy day  
that each of us  
may be united  
with infinity.



### **Credo quia impossibile**

The Virgin's presence here is real  
in this strange and tawdry shrine  
certain because impossible

a mock-Italian campanile  
flanks a nave false-Byzantine  
the Virgin's presence here is real

the cloying scent of incense steals  
over suburban polished pine  
believe because impossible

walls of the Holy House conceal  
altars where hosts of candles shine  
the Virgin's presence here is real

Our Lady's well your body heals  
by mystic powers unique divine  
certain because impossible

so we remember God's ordeal  
and share his fate in bread and wine  
the Virgin's presence here is real  
believe because impossible

*Walsingham, 1975*

### **A Stele in Athens Museum**

Hegeso sits there  
choosing her jewels with care  
her maid by her side.  
In the clear Athenian air  
she will for ever abide.

Happy Hegeso,  
her beauty will always be seen  
by those who pass by,  
nothing can ever demean  
her undying memory.

Danae dreams above  
the stormy dark-blue sea, gold—  
impregnated, true.

In motionless midday heat  
the Valley of the Tombs runs  
between the high-banked graves  
where the Bull and the Molossian Hound  
gaze across at Hegeso.  
It meets the Sacred Way  
by the old city wall  
and through the Dipylon Gate  
the Eridanus trickles  
ghost of its once-swift stream.  
In the stillness you can feel  
the all-embracing burning sun  
and living echoes, faint yet insistent of  
time past and time remembered.  
So when the mindful mind itself has gone  
what then remains?  
— the silent stones  
and the surrounding everlasting  
presence of the dead.

In Keramikos  
down the Valley of the Tombs  
the sepulchre of Lysimachides  
late of Acharnai shows  
the bark of Charon as it goes  
across the Styx to Hades,  
and above it looms  
a huge Molossian hound  
carved in Hymettan marble  
its sturdy body pacing out the ground.  
That Wednesday  
not far from Acharnai  
crossing the high pass  
between Parnes and Pentelicon  
I saw that hound again  
stretched slanting across the motorway  
its dead eyes turned towards the East  
its body still intact still whole  
soon to be flattened down  
by traffic that all day would never cease  
and in the end  
scraped off the tarmac by a dawn patrol.  
Eternally Fate so ordains  
the real is crushed—  
ideal form remains.

### Easter, 1976

The patterns shift of vivid red  
across the yellow and the blue  
marking the spots where blood was shed

where on the cross he hung and bled  
that stricken god whose love was true.  
Such patterns of vivid red

the stained glass backwards casts instead  
against the altar wall to prove  
that everywhere his blood was shed.

All of our needs and dreams are fed  
by that one act from which ensues  
such patterns of vivid red.

Without it we should live in dread  
a life of fear that never knew  
those joyful spots where blood was shed.

Lord of the living and the dead  
ensure our resurrection too.  
The patterns shift of vivid red  
marking the spots where blood was shed.



### The myth of God Incarnate

When he departed  
past the distant blue  
beyond the sunlight fading into  
interstellar dark  
and onwards ( where? )  
his body vanished  
and left one single clue  
to its identity,  
that phial of blood  
collected as he hung  
writhing upon the fatal rood.  
Those tangible remains,  
dripping from the lance that pierced and bled  
into the Grail  
became a symbol,  
soul-substance that redeemed  
and gave a new beginning,  
hope that his soul  
could penetrate each soul  
and that love  
would in the end prevail.  
Once men spent their lives  
seeking that sacred chalice,  
now they forget  
his message, say that he  
is just a myth, another noble man—  
and yet—

### Chartres

The sun sets  
and the high windows lose  
their jewelled radiance  
the Rose of France fades  
and in the Western Rose  
the Last Judgement concentrates  
the last rays of the sun.  
Candle-lit in splendour  
you shine in darkness in the aisle,  
Notre Dame du Pilier,  
focus of prayers and supplications,  
dreams and half-felt hopes.

The moon rises,  
its dull red shield enormous through the mist,  
the harvest moon  
a very Queen of Heaven  
near yet far away  
but real.  
You sit beside me in the car and say  
“How large it is tonight”  
I feel  
your actual presence more dear to me  
than any insubstantial goddess,  
your touch  
more valid than a thousand amulets,  
and your embrace  
the true communion of our disparate souls.

Concert in Canterbury Cathedral, Spring, 1975

Ghost white columns  
stretch their slim mouldings to the roof  
exploding in a fan of trceries,  
the bright light shines  
across the figured screen.  
Vivaldi fills the nave  
with a shifting skein  
of subtly-complex harmonies  
soft as spider's web  
then quick and clear  
till the embracing pattern  
at last appears.

Intense impassive black  
opposes the light  
from behind the screen.  
Here the Black Prince and Bolingbroke  
have lain for five hundred years.  
They rule the dark and wait  
knowing that soon  
the music and the light will go  
and they alone remain.  
The night's concert is a brief  
moment. All to dust  
will come, and in the end  
dust will engulf the world.

On Agde beach

Beach log  
dead tree trunk  
supine on the sand  
small head and branching limbs  
you lift your knees  
in leisured idleness  
reclining figure from the Rhône  
bleached by the sea.  
Dazzling heat  
surrounds you as you lie  
and gaze in mindless stillness  
across the gulf  
into the years before and after  
an endless moment  
eluding time.

Clumps of mistletoe  
deck the tall poplars  
with their magic spheres,  
lifting high  
dense circles of perfection.  
Their squashy fruits  
are changing now  
from green to gold.  
We stretch our hands  
up to the lowest  
almost out of reach  
and break the branches  
free, not possessing  
golden shears.  
Let us not have ill-luck,  
seeking these pledges  
of immortality.

*by the Loire, 1976*



### Le Cimetiere Marin

A row of Doric columns raised  
against blue sky  
    sea, sand and silence  
    doves' walk through cypress  
flat shore  
    drenched in light.  
What reality  
of this graveyard by the sea  
perched on steep St. Clair  
    huddled vaults and graves  
    confusing  
stone sepulchres  
    museum closed, your tomb not found  
pathetic prints  
of women in their Sunday best  
    smile into empty space—  
    below, the traffic on the Nationale  
    roars west to Beziers and beyond  
and topless girls  
drenched in sun oil  
    adorn the beach amid  
    the aimless chatter of France Inter  
    so little music, so much talk  
Yet in that spot  
    banal and vulgar  
    trippery  
eternal gods still walk.

Sète, 1976

### On listening to Fauré's Requiem

*Exaudi orationem*  
to all who underground now lie  
*dona eis requiem*

forbears of the family stem  
for your mercy have applied  
*exaudi orationem*

clinging to the Virgin's hem  
that child floats skywards with the cry  
*dona mihi requiem*

past all worldly stratagems  
my inmost self still strives to fly  
*exaudi orationem*

in Pasolini's Theorem  
the lost souls circle endlessly  
to sounds of Mozart's Requiem

in their despair remember them  
and all of us who soon shall die  
*dona nobis requiem.*