

GWEN HARWOOD

In the Park

She sits in the park. Her clothes are out of date.
Two children whine and bicker, tug her skirt.
A third draws aimless patterns in the dirt
Someone she loved once passed by – too late

to feign indifference to that casual nod.
“How nice” et cetera. “Time holds great surprises.”
From his neat head unquestionably rises
a small balloon...”but for the grace of God...”

They stand a while in flickering light, rehearsing
the children’s names and birthdays. “It’s so sweet
to hear their chatter, watch them grow and thrive, ”
she says to his departing smile. Then, nursing
the youngest child, sits staring at her feet.
To the wind she says, “They have eaten me alive.”

Barn Owl

Daybreak: the household slept.
I rose, blessed by the sun.
A horny fiend, I crept
out with my father's gun.
Let him dream of a child
obedient, angel-mind-

old no-sayer, robbed of power
by sleep. I knew my prize
who swooped home at this hour
with day-light riddled eyes
to his place on a high beam
in our old stables, to dream

light's useless time away.
I stood, holding my breath,
in urine-scented hay,
master of life and death,
a wisp-haired judge whose law
would punish beak and claw.

My first shot struck. He swayed,
ruined, beating his only
wing, as I watched, afraid
by the fallen gun, a lonely
child who believed death clean
and final, not this obscene

bundle of stuff that dropped,

and dribbled through the loose straw
tangling in bowels, and hopped
blindly closer. I saw
those eyes that did not see
mirror my cruelty

while the wrecked thing that could
not bear the light nor hide
hobbled in its own blood.
My father reached my side,
gave me the fallen gun.
'End what you have begun.'

I fired. The blank eyes shone
once into mine, and slept.
I leaned my head upon
my father's arm, and wept,
owl blind in early sun
for what I had begun

Triste Triste

In the space between love and sleep
when heart mourns in its prison
eyes against shoulder keep
their blood-black curtains tight.
Body rolls back like a stone, and risen
spirit walks to Easter light;

away from its tomb of bone,
away from the guardian tents
of eyesight, walking alone
to unbearable light with angelic
gestures. The fallen instruments
of its passion lie in the relic

darkness of sleep and love.
And heart from its prison cries
to the spirit walking above:
'I was with you in agony.
Remember your promise of paradise,'
and hammers and hammers, 'remember me.'

The Wound

The tenth day, and they give
my mirror back. Who knows
how to drink pain, and live?
I look, and the glass shows
the truth, fine as a hair,
of the scalpel's wounding care.

A round reproach to all
that's warped, uncertain, clouded,
the sun climbs. On the wall,
by the racked body shrouded
in pain, is a shadow thrown;
simple, unchanged, my own.

Body, on whom the claims
of spirit fall to inspire
and terrify, there flames
at your least breath a fire
of anguish, not for this pain,
but that scars will remain.

You will be loved no less.
Spirit can build, make shift
with what there is, and press
pain to its mould; will lift
from your crucible of night
a form dripping with light.

Felix culpa. The sun
lights in my flesh the great
wound of the world. What's done
is done. In man's estate
let my flawed wholeness prove
the art and scope of love.

John Shaw Neilson

The Orange Tree

The young girl stood beside me. I

Saw not what her young eyes could see:

- A light, she said, not of the sky
Lives somewhere in the Orange Tree.

- Is it, I said, of east or west?

The heartbeat of a luminous boy
Who with his faltering flute confessed
Only the edges of his joy?

Was he, I said, borne to the blue

In a mad escapade of Spring
Ere he could make a fond adieu
To his love in the blossoming?

- Listen! the young girl said. There calls

No voice, no music beats on me;
But it is almost sound: it falls
This evening on the Orange Tree.

- Does he, I said, so fear the Spring

Ere the white sap too far can climb?
See in the full gold evening
All happenings of the olden time?

Is he so goaded by the green?

Does the compulsion of the dew
Make him unknowable but keen
Asking with beauty of the blue?

- Listen! the young girl said. For all

Your hapless talk you fail to see
There is a light, a step, a call
This evening on the Orange Tree.

- Is it, I said, a waste of love

Imperishably old in pain,
Moving as an affrighted dove
Under the sunlight or the rain?

Is it a fluttering heart that gave

Too willingly and was reviled?
Is it the stammering at a grave,
The last word of a little child?

- Silence! the young girl said. Oh, why,

Why will you talk to weary me?
Plague me no longer now, for I
Am listening like the Orange Tree.

Meeting of Sighs

Your voice was the rugged
old voice that I knew;
I gave the best grip of
my greeting to you.
I know not of your lips —
you knew not of mine;
Of travel and travail
we gave not a sign.

We drank and we chorused
with quips in our eyes;
But under our song was
the meeting of sighs.
I knew not of your lips —
you knew not of mine;
For lean years and lone years
had watered the wine.

Beauty Imposes

Beauty imposes reverence in the Spring.
Grave as the urge within the honeybuds,
It wounds us as we sing.

Beauty is joy that stays not overlong.
Clad in the magic of sincerities,
It rides up in a song.

Beauty imposes chastenings on the heart,
Grave as the birds in last solemnities
Assembling to depart.

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