

G.K. Chesterton: Poems Selected by Ralph Wood

The Great Minimum

It is something to have wept as we have wept,
It is something to have done as we have done,
It is something to have watched when all men slept,
And seen the stars which never see the sun.

It is something to have smelt the mystic rose,
Although it break and leave the thorny rods,
It is something to have hungered once as those
Must hunger who have ate the bread of gods.

To have seen you and your unforgotten face,
Brave as a blast of trumpets for the fray,
Pure as white lilies in a watery space,
It were something, though you went from me today.

To have known the things that from the weak are furred,
Perilous ancient passions, strange and high;
It is something to be wiser than the world,
It is something to be older than the sky.

In a time of sceptic moths and cynic rusts,
And fattened lives that of their sweetness tire
In a world of flying loves and fading lusts,
It is something to be sure of a desire.

Lo, blessed are our ears for they have heard;
Yea, blessed are our eyes for they have seen:
Let the thunder break on man and beast and bird
And the lightning. It is something to have been.

A Ballade of Suicide

The gallows in my garden, people say,
Is new and neat and adequately tall;
I tie the noose on in a knowing way
As one that knots his necktie for a ball;
But just as all the neighbours--on the wall--
Are drawing a long breath to shout
"Hurray!"
The strangest whim has seized me. . . . After all
I think I will not hang myself to-day.

To-morrow is the time I get my pay--
My uncle's sword is hanging in the hall--
I see a little cloud all pink and grey--
Perhaps the rector's mother will NOT call--
I fancy that I heard from Mr. Gall
That mushrooms could be cooked another way--
I never read the works of Juvenal--
I think I will not hang myself to-day.

The world will have another washing-day;
The decadents decay; the pedants pall;
And H.G. Wells has found that children play,
And Bernard Shaw discovered that they squall;
Rationalists are growing rational--
And through thick woods one finds a stream astray,
So secret that the very sky seems small--
I think I will not hang myself to-day.

ENVOI

Prince, I can hear the trumpet of Germinal,
The tumbrils toiling up the terrible way;
Even to-day your royal head may fall--
I think I will not hang myself to-day.

The Rolling English Road

Before the Roman came to Rye or out to
Severn strode,
The rolling English drunkard made the
rolling English road.
A reeling road, a rolling road, that rambles
round the shire,
And after him the parson ran, the sexton
and the squire;
A merry road, a mazy road, and such as we
did tread
The night we went to Birmingham by way
of Beachy Head.

I knew no harm of Bonaparte and plenty of
the Squire,
And for to fight the Frenchman I did not
much desire;
But I did bash their baggonets because they
came arrayed
To straighten out the crooked road an
English drunkard made,
Where you and I went down the lane with
ale-mugs in our hands,
The night we went to Glastonbury by way of
Goodwin Sands.

His sins they were forgiven him; or why do
flowers run
Behind him; and the hedges all
strengthening in the sun?
The wild thing went from left to right and
knew not which was which,
But the wild rose was above him when they
found him in the ditch.
God pardon us, nor harden us; we did not
see so clear
The night we went to Bannockburn by way
of Brighton Pier.

My friends, we will not go again or ape an
ancient rage,

Or stretch the folly of our youth to be the
shame of age,
But walk with clearer eyes and ears this path
that wandereth,
And see undrugged in evening light the
decent inn of death;
For there is good news yet to hear and fine
things to be seen,
Before we go to Paradise by way of Kensal
Green.

The Song of Right and Wrong

Feast on wine or fast on water
And your honour shall stand sure,
God Almighty's son and daughter
He the valiant, she the pure;
If an angel out of heaven
Brings you other things to drink,
Thank him for his kind attentions,
Go and pour them down the sink.

Tea is like the East he grows in,
A great yellow Mandarin
With urbanity of manner
And unconsciousness of sin;
All the women, like a harem,
At his pig-tail troop along;
And, like all the East he grows in,
He is Poison when he's strong.

Tea, although an Oriental,
Is a gentleman at least;
Cocoa is a cad and coward,
Cocoa is a vulgar beast,
Cocoa is a dull, disloyal,
Lying, crawling cad and clown,
And may very well be grateful
To the fool that takes him down.

As for all the windy waters,
They were rained like tempests down
When good drink had been dishonoured

By the tipplers of the town;
When red wine had brought red ruin
And the death-dance of our times,
Heaven sent us Soda Water
As a torment for our crimes.

The House of Christmas

There fared a mother driven forth
Out of an inn to roam;
In the place where she was homeless
All men are at home.
The crazy stable close at hand,
With shaking timber and shifting sand,
Grew a stronger thing to abide and stand
Than the square stones of Rome.

For men are homesick in their homes,
And strangers under the sun,
And they lay on their heads in a foreign land
Whenever the day is done.
Here we have battle and blazing eyes,
And chance and honour and high surprise,
But our homes are under miraculous skies
Where the yule tale was begun.

A Child in a foul stable,
Where the beasts feed and foam;
Only where He was homeless
Are you and I at home;
We have hands that fashion and heads that
know,
But our hearts we lost - how long ago!
In a place no chart nor ship can show
Under the sky's dome.

This world is wild as an old wives' tale,
And strange the plain things are,
The earth is enough and the air is enough
For our wonder and our war;
But our rest is as far as the fire-drake swings
And our peace is put in impossible things
Where clashed and thundered unthinkable

wings
Round an incredible star.

To an open house in the evening
Home shall men come,
To an older place than Eden
And a taller town than Rome.
To the end of the way of the wandering star,
To the things that cannot be and that are,
To the place where God was homeless
And all men are at home.

Hymn for the Church Militant

Great God, that bowest sky and star,
Bow down our towering thoughts to thee,
And grant us in a faltering war
The firm feet of humility.

Lord, we that snatch the swords of flame,
Lord, we that cry about Thy ear,
We too are weak with pride and shame,
We too are as our foemen are.

Yea, we are mad as they are mad,
Yea, we are blind as they are blind,
Yea, we are very sick and sad
Who bring good news to all mankind.

The dreadful joy Thy Son has sent
Is heavier than any care;
We find, as Cain his punishment,
Our pardon more than we can bear.

Lord, when we cry Thee far and near
And thunder through all lands unknown
The gospel into every ear,
Lord, let us not forget our own.

Cleanse us from ire of creed or class,
The anger of the idle kings;
Sow in our souls, like living grass,
The laughter of all lowly things.

The Truce of Christmas

Passionate peace is in the sky
And on the snow in silver sealed
The beasts are perfect in the field
And men seem men so suddenly
(But take ten swords, and ten times ten,
And blow the bugle in praising men
For we are for all men under the sun
And they are against us every one
And misers haggle, and mad men clutch
And there is peril in praising much
And we have the terrible tongues un-curved
That praise the world to the sons of the
world.)

The idle humble hill and wood
Are bowed about the sacred Birth
And for one little while the earth
Is lazy with the love of good
(But ready are you and ready am I
If the battle blow and the guns go by
For we are for all men under the sun
And they are against us every one
For the men that hate herd altogether
To pride and gold and the great white
feather
And the thing is graven in star and stone
That the men that love are all alone.)

Hunger is hard and time is tough
But bless the beggars and kiss the kings
For hope has broken the heart of things
And nothing was ever praised enough
(But hold the shield for a sudden swing
And point the sword in praising a thing
For we are for all men under the sun
And they are against us every one
And mime and merchant, thane and thrall,
Hate us because we love them all
Only till Christmas time goes by
Passionate peace is in the sky.)

A Hymn

O God of earth and altar,
Bow down and hear our cry,
Our earthly rulers falter,
Our people drift and die;
The walls of gold entomb us,
The swords of scorn divide,
Take not thy thunder from us,
But take away our pride.

From all that terror teaches,
From lies of tongue and pen,
From all the easy speeches
That comfort cruel men,
From sale and profanation
Of honour and the sword,
From sleep and from damnation,
Deliver us, good Lord.

Tie in a living tether
The prince and priest and thrall,
Bind all our lives together,
Smite us and save us all;
In ire and exultation
Aflame with faith, and free,
Lift up a living nation,
A single sword to thee.

The Nativity

The thatch on the roof was as golden,
Though dusty the straw was and old,
The wind had a peal as of trumpets,
Though blowing and barren and cold,
The mother's hair was a glory
Though loosened and torn,
For under the eaves in the gloaming
A child was born.

Have a myriad children been quickened,

Have a myriad children grown old,
Grown gross and unloved and embittered,
Grown cunning and savage and cold?
God abides in a terrible patience,
Unangered, unworn,
And again for the child that was squandered
A child is born.

What know we of aeons behind us,
Dim dynasties lost long ago,
Huge empires, like dreams unremembered,
Huge cities for ages laid low?
This at least—that with blight and with
blessing,
With flower and with thorn,
Love was there, and his cry was among
them,
“A child is born.”

Though the darkness be noisy with systems,
Dark fancies that fret and disprove,
Still the plumes stir around us, above us
The wings of the shadow of love:
Oh! Princes and priests, have ye seen it
Grow pale through your scorn;
Huge dawns sleep before us, deep changes,
A child is born.

And the rafters of toil still are gilded
With the dawn of the stars of the heart,
And the wise men draw near in the twilight,
Who are weary of learning and art,
And the face of the tyrant is darkened,
His spirit is torn,
For a new king is enthroned; yea, the
sternest,
A child is born.

And the mother still joys for the whispered
First stir of unspeakable things,
Still feels that high moment unfurling
Red glory of Gabriel's wings.
Still the babe of an hour is a master
Whom angels adorn,

Emmanuel, prophet, anointed,
A child is born.

And thou, that art still in thy cradle,
The sun being crown for thy brow,
Make answer, our flesh, make an answer,
Say, whence art thou come—who art thou?
Art thou come back on earth for our
teaching
To train or to warn—?
Hush—how may we know?—knowing only
A child is born.

A Child of the Snows

There is heard a hymn when the panes are
dim,
And never before or again,
When the nights are strong with a darkness
long,
And the dark is alive with rain.

Never we know but in sleet and in snow,
The place where the great fires are,
That the midst of the earth is a raging mirth
And the heart of the earth a star.

And at night we win to the ancient inn
Where the child in the frost is furled,
We follow the feet where all souls meet
At the inn at the end of the world.

The gods lie dead where the leaves lie red,
For the flame of the sun is flown,
The gods lie cold where the leaves lie gold,
And a Child comes forth alone.

By the Babe Unborn

If trees were tall and grasses short,
As in some crazy tale,
If here and there a sea were blue
Beyond the breaking pale,

If a fixed fire hung in the air
To warm me one day through,
If deep green hair grew on great hills,
I know what I should do.

In dark I lie; dreaming that there
Are great eyes cold or kind,
And twisted streets and silent doors,
And living men behind.

Let storm clouds come: better an hour,
And leave to weep and fight,
Than all the ages I have ruled
The empires of the night.

I think that if they gave me leave
Within the world to stand,
I would be good through all the day
I spent in fairyland.

They should not hear a word from me
Of selfishness or scorn,
If only I could find the door,
If only I were born.

The Unpardonable Sin

I do not cry, beloved, neither curse.
Silence and strength, these two at least are
good.
He gave me sun and stars and aught He
could,
But not a woman's love; for that is hers.

He sealed her heart from sage and
questioner --

Yea, with seven seals, as he has sealed the
grave.

And if she give it to a drunken slave,
The Day of Judgment shall not challenge
her.

Only this much: if one, deserving well,
Touching your thin young hands and
making suit,
Feel not himself a crawling thing, a brute,
Buried and bricked in a forgotten hell;

Prophet and poet be he over sod,
Prince among angels in the highest place,
God help me, I will smite him on the face,
Before the glory of the face of God.

The Donkey

When fishes flew and forests walked
And figs grew upon thorn,
Some moment when the moon was blood
Then surely I was born.

With monstrous head and sickening cry
And ears like errant wings,
The devil's walking parody
On all four-footed things.

The tattered outlaw of the earth,
Of ancient crooked will;
Starve, scourge, deride me: I am dumb,
I keep my secret still.

Fools! For I also had my hour;
One far fierce hour and sweet:
There was a shout about my ears,
And palms before my feet.

From The Ballad of the White Horse

I tell you naught for your comfort,
Yea, naught for your desire,
Save that the sky grows darker yet
And the sea rises higher.
Night shall be thrice over you,
And heaven an iron cope.
Do you have joy without a cause,
Yea, faith without hope?

