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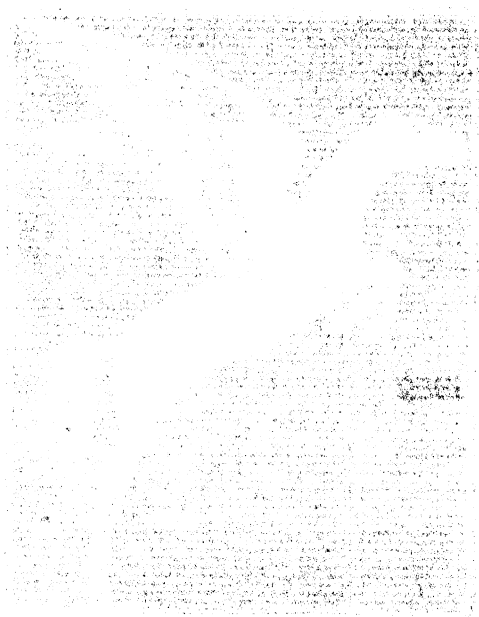
Author Meynell, Francis

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SEVENTEEN POEMS

FRANCIS MEYNELL
SEVENTEEN POEMS



THE NONESUCH PRESS · NEW YORK

1945

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DEDICATION OF THE ORIGINAL EDITION

TO W. J. TURNER
OSBERT SITWELL AND
RODNEY HOBSON

Dear Dedicators, now Dedicatees:

Fifteen poems among three of you! Only fifteen poems, and two publishers to share the imprint! No, I won't advance the argument offered to me by a friend that my economy is sound as long as I have more poems than publishers. Instead I offer an explanation. A cross-section of my life in any one of my grown-up years would have shown me busy, and happy, in several occupations at once: as political journalist, publisher, printer; as lecturer, films-man, columnist; as temporary Civil Servant, broadcaster, advertising agent. In all these cross-sections a skilled dissector would have exposed a very small vein of poetry along with a large vein of typography. Moreover I have never put work before life; I have satisfied my senses, enjoyed the companionship of friends, and played games with more than Australian determination though less than village skill. A full life has meant an empty book. Few as they are, the lines — the side-lines — here collected cover some thirty years of my life. This is my first, doubtless it will be my last, one-man-show in poetry. To you who have in the past honoured me with dedications..I now make this tardy and meagre return. * * *

F. M.

London, July, 1944

CONTENTS

<i>Time Is Not Mocked</i>	PAGE 9
<i>Last Love</i>	10
<i>The Palace at Spalato</i>	11
<i>Tissue of Time</i>	12
<i>Man and Beast</i>	14
<i>On Lending a Wrist-Watch</i>	16
<i>Pentecost</i>	17
<i>To X</i>	18
<i>There's a Divinity</i>	20
<i>Epitaph</i>	22
<i>Mirage at Mickleham</i>	23
<i>Home Front</i>	24
<i>Flying Over</i>	25
<i>Bomber's Harvest</i>	26
<i>Missing</i>	27
<i>On Dreaming of the Dead</i>	28
<i>The Return</i>	29

Time Is Not Mocked

Did you when you were five
Play ring-a-roses round the slow-foot seconds?
Go distant journeys twixt the tick and tock?
Perceive your mother, between beck and beckoned,
Age, sicken, die — and come again alive
(O wonderful!) with the rustle of her frock?
If I slipped sideways, breath-bound, swift and supple,
I could pass between the clock-beats to the closet
Not scraping either second of its bloom;
Then from their pegs, like clothes, new lives uncouple,
And try them on, 'gainst my own shape's deposit.
I was the He, the Hunter. Time was the stay-at-home.

My mother died when I was grown a man.
Time came to look. Time lingered. Time began.

Last Love

Apple trees in my orchard now
So over-laden are with fruit
That the once taut and sterile bough
Is bent right back upon the root.

How is it with our ripening love?
With this surprising harvest, how?
Be southern, winds, within the grove
Lest fall the fruit or break the bough!

The Palace at Spalato

(IN MEMORY OF GARROW TOMLIN)

Like weeds the hovels grow against this wall
Once ring and finger of far-reaching Rome.
Beggars and builders in the long interval
Have filched and fumbled away great Caesar's home.

A city fallen to dust. Go, pick it up,
Puff tower and hall in pinches from your hand.
Some clings upon your lips? Think, as you sup,
This was a flower of that summer-land.

A city fallen to dust? And yet today
Bastion and bridge and keep and desperate spire
Give homeless men a half-house where to stay
And lend a fourth wall to the cattle-byre.

You other city, dust that was my friend —
Of all the principalities and powers
Which your rich senses lorded, there's an end:
Scarcely the name of the city now endures.

Before men quite forget you, as they must,
I make this monument of your dear dust.

Tissue of Time

There is no means to annul
One gesture, one word.
These are tissue of Time, these are all
Immortal. I have heard

Egypt and her Antony
With their first love fulfilled
Cry out, and again cry;
Nor ever are they stilled.

Sheba still turns her head
For the sound of great Solomon;
Judith is dressing the bed
For her King to die upon.

Though Helen's lips are dust
The kisses of her lips
Still burn the towers, and must
Still launch the thousand ships.

Tissue of Time, held fast,
Are all things done or undone;
Eternity makes no haste
In Babylon or London.

Though they have never moved
These hundred hundred years
Their rhythm when they loved
Lives ever, and their tears.

When your love's flight shall falter
Shall fall, like a wounded bird,
You too cannot alter
The said or the unsaid word.

So this is the sum of it, this —
Say not it is not much:
You cannot unkiss that kiss;
You cannot untouch that touch.

Man and Beast

I am less patient than this horse
And it is fleeter far than I.
Its hair is silky, mine is coarse;
Grasses have shaped that larger eye,
While to feed me live things must die.

The birds make little darts in air,
And fishes little darts in water,
Old sheep a silver glory share,
Peacocks are peacocks everywhere . . .
Man lies awake, planning the slaughter.

What woman has this old cat's graces?
What boy can sing as the thrush sings?
For me, I'd rather not run races
With dragon-flies, nor thread the mazes
Of a smooth lawn with ants and things.

Yet horse and sheep tread leaf and stem
And bud and flower beneath their feet;
They sniff at Stars-of-Bethlehem
And buttercups are food to them,
No more than bitter food or sweet.

I, to whom air and waves are sealed,
I yet possess the human part.
O better beasts, you now must yield!
I name the cool stars of the field;
I have the flowers of heaven by heart.

On Lending a Wrist-Watch

The taloned peregrine
Sharp but undefiant
In pictures I have seen
Perched on the pliant
Wrist of the lady . . .
Does her heart beat fast?
Is her hand unsteady?
Do her eyes look past
The sport, the adventure —
See under the hood
The beak of a vulture
Smeared with the song-bird's blood?
Or does she, blind to all carrion,
See only the wind-borne, the starry one?

Time like a falcon gazes on the sun —
Sees his spent universes one by one
Drop, the tired fledglings, back into the nest . . .

Time stays his flight. Look, Time is on your wrist.

Pentecost

(IN TWO UPPER ROOMS)

They prayed for wisdom. God
In an ironic mood
Cast to them, kneeling at the ladder's lowest rungs,
His gift — his gift of tongues.

* * *

The speech goes on and on — dull repartees,
Statesmanlike forecasts, generous eulogies,
Till ears and mouth and mind are full of — cheese.
Sir Lacy Fair is grown so very very
Eloquent that we're caught 'twixt wind and sherry.
He is a Prince of talkers I am certain:
But will there never be a final curtain?
Bored angel, gaping angel — on him bestow
A pentecostal gift of silence now!

To X

ABSENT AT WINTER-SPORTS

You who are warm and sure and still,
Of the lamp, the book, the window-sill —
I cannot see you of the snow.
You are a stranger to me now.

I do not know you taut and brave
An eaglet on earth's architrave,
The grace-notes of the final stave.

But when dusk makes the valley misty
And touch as well as sight grows dark,
And you with your much-practised Christy
Or taken-for-granted telemark
Reach bath and food and bed, at home
— At last I know you! I become
The register and metronome
Of every pulse and pause and start
In your once-more-familiar heart —
A mappa-mundi of your mind.

Switch on the light; draw down the blind.

One moment at the mirror, one
To smooth your hair. Now cast your gown.
Turn down the bed. Stand naked. So.
Your body is your only snow.
You are no stranger to me now.

There's a Divinity

['MAN HAS MADE GOD IN HIS OWN IMAGE
AND LIKENESS']

A myriad years God toiled to mould
Molecular stone to his intent.
Drawn and redrawn, in rust, in gold,
It triumphed against the Omnipotent.
He strove until his strength grew old,
Then cried 'Your help, my firmament!'

The stars in succour lent their light,
The vassal moon her ocean-sway;
Nebula, comet, meteorite
Sent signals to the advancing day.
To shape his cherished dust aright
God called the winds to that array,

And all the increment of earth,
And all the hidden weight of skies,
The plenty in the land, the dearth,
The priest, the fire, the sacrifice,
Pain, and man's death-begetting birth . . .
Victor, he held as nought the price.

Until at last he judged the stone
Fit bed for beasts to lie upon.

Master of Process, speed my days
Of access to substantial me.
Nothing I find that's fit to praise
In my vague versatility.
Send song or silence, structure send,
Refine this stone, anatomize;
Reshape, Divinity, my end
That I may shape divinities.

Epitaph

(FOR E. F.'S ALBUM)

Elizabeth

A stranger still to Death

Registers in this place

Her sum of days.

Although he knows her name

Death for the life of him

Cannot re-call her face.

Mirage at Mickleham

This country was not strange to me
Nor quite familiar grown.
I knew it not by stack and tree,
Only by wood and down.

Dazzled by dappled land and light
And scarce-transparent shadow
I thought I saw that quickening sight —
The field close-set, the men in white —
Cricketers in the meadow.

And yet no batsman takes his guard
No ball is bowled, no hit is heard.

The haze is blown, the yew-tree stirs.
For sign of life I search the sward.
Only white stones, these cricketers —
Only white stones in the churchyard.

Home Front

In all the random sluttishness of war
Let us record
The town's recovery of moon and star,
And praise the Lord
For silk-and-silver fish
Ballooning in their bowl of sky,
And wish
That London's willowherb will never die.

Flying Over

SPRING 1944

What does the wind carry to-day?
What garden seeds and scents?
What morning sounds as light as they?
What early innocence?

Air-borne this argosy of bees;
And wind and fledglings share
So close a concert with the trees
We call a song, an air.

Airs with one wing upon the ground
Buttress the gossamer.
Air is the minister of sound,
The sun's interpreter.

* * *

To-night what does the wind ferry?
What burdens so its breath?
These garden airs, what do they carry?
The thistledown of death.

Man through the night is flying blind.
For you, who are part of his flight,
For you, for us, what's in the wind?
What's in the wind to-night?

Bomber's Harvest

NORMANDY 1944

O fecund Sun, shaper of all,
 Master of senses, giver of breath,
Meat at the table, grain in the stall,
Peach kindled on the southern wall —
Fulfil this harvest festival
 Not now with life, O Sun, but death.

Leave now the ripening of the grain,
 Leave now the readying of the stack.
For Earth — your suckling, yet to wean —
Condense the woe, contract the pain,
Heap your bright torment on the plain —
 O Sun, be crueller, for her sake!

To-day shine out in pitiful wrath,
 Burnish the sky, make clear as noon
Shades where the Thing still stalks the earth.
Light up, light up the bomber's path . . .
Now, in the anguished aftermath,
 Be crueller for Earth's sake, O Sun!

Missing

(FOR P. B.)

He wore his wings as lightly as a lark.
‘Missing’ you say? But he found and made his mark;
It is we who are missing, we who are out in the dark.
‘Top of the world!’ he said, and ‘Lighter than air!’ . . .
Meaning ‘ad astra’ — to his own particular star.
That’s for his epitaph, or, if you like, our prayer.
He said: ‘I’ll be seeing you there.’

On Dreaming of the Dead

Dear love, dear ghost, superfluous
Is your possession of my dream:
Our dead need not return to us,
So surely do we pass to them.

The Return

'I cannot bear the thought that I
Will cease to love you when I die.'
But think, my dear, we both were dead
As long before those words were said
As we'll be after; death extends
Both ways towards its endless ends;
As well the infinite past demand
As grasp the future in your hand.
You grieve: 'How slow in sap we were
Before our loves began to stir;'
Forgetting that an absolute dearth
Lay on the barren side of birth.
No unknown sea, no alien shore
Awaits: we've travelled there before.
So when, this dear day being done,
We — resolute, self-sustained, alone,
Our passion packed, a sheet drawn over
All the used hopes of loved and lover —
To the known ends of Nothing start,
Heeding no charm, needing no chart —

Quick, hold your hand against my heart.

*This edition has been limited to one thousand copies
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