

MCPHAIL-EDWARDS, MARY HANNAH

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Category: Poetry

Poems

The Beast and the Maiden

Only beasts traverse these waters
These heartless lilac skies
Gone silver with the aching backbones
Of beasts of burden who hear their names once every lifetime.

“I love you,” said the beast,
“As sin loves the white fingers of angels,
As death loves the things which cannot die,
As the gaping maw of history loves men with conflicted souls.”

“Ridiculous,” said the maiden. “It should go:
I love you as the sun loves farm girls’ shoulders,
As mistakes love those who cannot afford to make them,
As the sky loves towers that press into its surface.”

“Let me try again,” said the beast.
“I love you as ghosts love lonely girls in old houses,
As disappointment loves the things that cannot be helped,
As cold loves the holes in a coat.”

“No, no,” said the maiden. “You should say:
I love you as warriors love the blood of their own backs,
As watchers love the things which cannot be seen,
As arguers love the final word.”

“I think I’ve got it now,” said the beast. “I love you
As anger loves proof of its own accuracy,
As the pen loves the things which should not be recorded,
As gold loves the refinement of fire.”

“You don’t understand,” said the maiden. “Try this:
I love you as shooting stars love the horizon,
As shadows love the light that penetrates,
As the road loves those who flee.”

“Don’t you see?” said the beast. “I love you
As an ugly thing loves a beautiful thing.”

“Oh,” said the maiden.

“Well, I suppose that’s all right.”

Heart of the Oak

Not last night and not this morning
In a time between the folds of history
I walked beside the river bed and the valleys full of cat-tails
To the place where the trees speak.
As you know, the trees are always speaking
But I don't listen as often as I might.

I came across an oak tree with eyes of golden filament
And grasping fingers like knitting needles.
I asked him, "Where should I go?
And once I get there, what should I do?
Tell me quick, for it's beginning to rain
And your leaves cannot keep me dry for long."

"Go where the ground burns the soles of your feet," he said,
"And the air is not the sort you can breathe.
Go have your heart preserved in bronze
And bring it back here to me."

"I'm afraid to go there," I said,
For I knew the place that he meant.
"And furthermore, I don't want to.
So tell me, where else could I go?"

"All right," said the tree, who understood
That I seldom did the things that I ought.
"Go to the land where the lemon grass grows
Taller than the crown of your head.
Stand on your toes and stretch up your arms
Until you can hold the sun, like a boiled egg,
In your scratched and muddy hands.
Replace your heart with that sun, and bring your heart back here to me."

"I might go there," I said,
"But as you can see, I'm not very tall,
And on second thought, I don't much care for eggs.
So tell me, where else could I go?"

"If you do not seek your destruction," said the tree,
"Go where the fog wraps your ankles all night
But dissipates in the morning.
If you must feel this pain, this unnecessary hardship
Make a cross from my wood and bear it on your back
But when it becomes too heavy, put it down
And bring your heart back here to me."

I was impatient, and sought the path
That would pain me the most to tread.
"My supper is burning," I said,
"And rainwater drips into my ears.
So tell me, before I give up my heart,
Where else could I go?"

"Have it your way," he said, for he was patient
But it could never be said that he was kind.
"Take my limbs as the posts for your marriage bed,

Take my leaves to garland your hair.
Open up your chest with a sharpened piece of bark
And go wherever you like. Do whatever you must,
But leave your heart here for me.”

Not last night and not this morning
In a time between the folds of history
I walked beside the river bed and the valleys full of cat-tails
To the place where the trees speak.
As you know, the trees are always speaking
But I don't listen as often as I might.

Lancelot

Incline your ear to me, my dear,
Let me tell you what you already know.
Love as such, though it tends to the absurd,
Must be told in wiser words
Than a heart in this condition could fathom.
I would let you hold my heart in your mouth
As a cat would a bird
And speak around it, though it could not clarify
The feeling that comes when, with foolish eyes,
I see your feet directed along my path.
Come to me in the garden and purify my hands with your hands.
Love, if I have ever known it, is not circumstance
Or convenience; it is recognition of unworthiness
When you lower your eyes to look upon me.
You know— you could not fail to— that you are the key to my heart
Won't you let me back in?

I Told You Not To Love Me

I know that I made for you a coat of white leaves
And in return, you gave me a hat with flowers in the brim.
I know that I danced with you beneath a harvest moon
And told you how tides fell upon its shores.
I know these things have all been done, and the things I said were true
But I told you not to love me, so you must not.

I know that we sailed away in a boat named after me
And met a creature with eyes as green as original sin.
But I can't quite recall what happened after we mounted the horizon
And you know that the ocean comes to an end.
That's why I told you not to love me, so you must not.

You know that when I looked at you, I saw a stranger that I knew
As well as a confusing sort of friend.
I hung the curtains from the rods just so I could draw them closed
I brought you to the door before I decided to let you in.
That's why I told you not to love me, so you must not.

There are those who like adventure and grand gestures
On occasion, I could believe that I feel that way you say you do.
But all that I'm really looking for is someone to recognize
To make me notice that the sky is wide and blue.

I know these things have all been done, and the things I said were true.
You really shouldn't love me, but there's a chance I might love you.

Another Time

I saw you from across the street and thought you looked familiar
As if maybe I'd seen your face against the wild and windy moors
While I was searching for the ruins of a castle.
And later saw you standing outside my window in the rain
Knocking on the glass and shouting things I couldn't hear
Until I thought I really ought to go outside.
And I'd seen you and known you and wanted to know you more
But that didn't happen, and I don't know what to say.

Or maybe I saw you slumped against a stone column in a vast and dreary ballroom
And we danced a complex, forgotten waltz
While you kept your hands on my shoulders and your eyes on my eyes
And neither of us had ever had someone to look at that way
And I'd seen you and known you and wanted to know you more
But that didn't happen, and I don't know what to say.

There's a world in which you saw me at a gathering of artists
Squirming in my borrowed dress and pushing my hair behind my ears.
And you asked my friends about me and they told you not to even try
But you played your records for me because you wanted to know me like they did
And I'd seen you and known you and wanted to know you more
But that didn't happen, and I don't know what to say.

There used to be a time when we roamed the woods together
And wove sunflowers into each other's hair
Or perhaps we sailed together on a sea as smooth as glass
Or danced with bare feet across the sand.
I know that I knew you in one time or another
Because I've been missing you a while.
I used to love you, and I'm sure I could again.
And I see you and I know you and I want to know you more
One day, something will happen and I will know what to say.