

# Classic Poetry Series

**C S Lewis**

**- poems -**

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## **After Prayers, Lie Cold**

Arise my body, my small body, we have striven  
Enough, and He is merciful; we are forgiven.  
Arise small body, puppet-like and pale, and go,  
White as the bed-clothes into bed, and cold as snow,  
Undress with small, cold fingers and put out the light,  
And be alone, hush'd mortal, in the sacred night,  
-A meadow whipt flat with the rain, a cup  
Emptied and clean, a garment washed and folded up,  
Faded in colour, thinned almost to raggedness  
By dirt and by the washing of that dirtiness.  
Be not too quickly warm again. Lie cold; consent  
To weariness' and pardon's watery element.  
Drink up the bitter water, breathe the chilly death;  
Soon enough comes the riot of our blood and breath.

C S Lewis

## **An Expostulation**

Against too many writers of science fiction

Why did you lure us on like this,  
Light-year on light-year, through the abyss,  
Building (as though we cared for size!)  
Empires that cover galaxies  
If at the journey's end we find  
The same old stuff we left behind,  
Well-worn Tellurian stories of  
Crooks, spies, conspirators, or love,  
Whose setting might as well have been  
The Bronx, Montmartre, or Bedinal Green?

Why should I leave this green-floored cell,  
Roofed with blue air, in which we dwell,  
Unless, outside its guarded gates,  
Long, long desired, the Unearthly waits  
Strangeness that moves us more than fear,  
Beauty that stabs with tingling spear,  
Or Wonder, laying on one's heart  
That finger-tip at which we start  
As if some thought too swift and shy  
For reason's grasp had just gone by?

C S Lewis

## **As the Ruin Falls**

All this is flashy rhetoric about loving you.  
I never had a selfless thought since I was born.  
I am mercenary and self-seeking through and through:  
I want God, you, all friends, merely to serve my turn.

Peace, re-assurance, pleasure, are the goals I seek,  
I cannot crawl one inch outside my proper skin:  
I talk of love --a scholar's parrot may talk Greek--  
But, self-imprisoned, always end where I begin.

Only that now you have taught me (but how late) my lack.  
I see the chasm. And everything you are was making  
My heart into a bridge by which I might get back  
From exile, and grow man. And now the bridge is breaking.

For this I bless you as the ruin falls. The pains  
You give me are more precious than all other gains.

C S Lewis

## Cliche Came Out of its Cage

1

You said 'The world is going back to Paganism'.  
Oh bright Vision! I saw our dynasty in the bar of the House  
Spill from their tumblers a libation to the Erinyes,  
And Leavis with Lord Russell wreathed in flowers, heralded with flutes,  
Leading white bulls to the cathedral of the solemn Muses  
To pay where due the glory of their latest theorem.  
Hestia's fire in every flat, rekindled, burned before  
The Lardergods. Unmarried daughters with obedient hands  
Tended it By the hearth the white-armd venerable mother  
Domum servabat, lanam faciebat. at the hour  
Of sacrifice their brothers came, silent, corrected, grave  
Before their elders; on their downy cheeks easily the blush  
Arose (it is the mark of freemen's children) as they trooped,  
Gleaming with oil, demurely home from the palaestra or the dance.  
Walk carefully, do not wake the envy of the happy gods,  
Shun Hubris. The middle of the road, the middle sort of men,  
Are best. Aidos surpasses gold. Reverence for the aged  
Is wholesome as seasonable rain, and for a man to die  
Defending the city in battle is a harmonious thing.  
Thus with magistral hand the Puritan Sophrosune  
Cooled and schooled and tempered our uneasy motions;  
Heathendom came again, the circumspection and the holy fears ...  
You said it. Did you mean it? Oh inordinate liar, stop.

2

Or did you mean another kind of heathenry?  
Think, then, that under heaven-roof the little disc of the earth,  
Fortified Midgard, lies encircled by the ravening Worm.  
Over its icy bastions faces of giant and troll  
Look in, ready to invade it. The Wolf, admittedly, is bound;  
But the bond wil1 break, the Beast run free. The weary gods,  
Scarred with old wounds the one-eyed Odin, Tyr who has lost a hand,  
Will limp to their stations for the Last defence. Make it your hope  
To be counted worthy on that day to stand beside them;  
For the end of man is to partake of their defeat and die  
His second, final death in good company. The stupid, strong  
Uteachable monsters are certain to be victorious at last,  
And every man of decent blood is on the losing side.  
Take as your model the tall women with yellow hair in plaits  
Who walked back into burning houses to die with men,  
Or him who as the death spear entered into his vitals  
Made critical comments on its workmanship and aim.  
Are these the Pagans you spoke of? Know your betters and crouch, dogs;  
You that have Vichy water in your veins and worship the event  
Your goddess History (whom your fathers called the strumpet Fortune).

C S Lewis

## Evolutionary Hymn

Lead us, Evolution, lead us  
Up the future's endless stair;  
Chop us, change us, prod us, weed us.  
For stagnation is despair:  
Groping, guessing, yet progressing,  
Lead us nobody knows where.

Wrong or justice, joy or sorrow,  
In the present what are they  
while there's always jam-tomorrow,  
While we tread the onward way?  
Never knowing where we're going,  
We can never go astray.

To whatever variation  
Our posterity may turn  
Hairy, squashy, or crustacean,  
Bulbous-eyed or square of stern,  
Tusked or toothless, mild or ruthless,  
Towards that unknown god we yearn.

Ask not if it's god or devil,  
Brethren, lest your words imply  
Static norms of good and evil  
(As in Plato) throned on high;  
Such scholastic, inelastic,  
Abstract yardsticks we deny.

Far too long have sages vainly  
Glossed great Nature's simple text;  
He who runs can read it plainly,  
'Goodness = what comes next.'  
By evolving, Life is solving  
All the questions we perplexed.

Oh then! Value means survival-  
Value. If our progeny  
Spreads and spawns and licks each rival,  
That will prove its deity  
(Far from pleasant, by our present,  
Standards, though it may well be).

C S Lewis

## **On a Vulgar Error**

No. It's an impudent falsehood. Men did not  
Invariably think the newer way Prosaic  
mad, inelegant, or what not.

Was the first pointed arch esteemed a blot  
Upon the church? Did anybody say How  
modern and how ugly? They did not.

Plate-armour, or windows glazed, or verse fire-hot  
With rhymes from France, or spices from Cathay,  
Were these at first a horror? They were not.

If, then, our present arts, laws, houses, food  
All set us hankering after yesterday,  
Need this be only an archaising mood?

Why, any man whose purse has been let blood  
By sharpers, when he finds all drained away  
Must compare how he stands with how he stood.

If a quack doctor's breezy ineptitude  
Has cost me a leg, must I forget straightway  
All that I can't do now, all that I could?

So, when our guides unanimously decry  
The backward glance, I think we can guess why.

C S Lewis

## On Being Human

Angelic minds, they say, by simple intelligence  
Behold the Forms of nature. They discern  
Unerringly the Archtypes, all the verities  
Which mortals lack or indirectly learn.  
Transparent in primordial truth, unvarying,  
Pure Earthness and right Stonehood from their clear,  
High eminence are seen; unveiled, the seminal  
Huge Principles appear.

The Tree-ness of the tree they know-the meaning of  
Arboreal life, how from earth's salty lap  
The solar beam uplifts it; all the holiness  
Enacted by leaves' fall and rising sap;

But never an angel knows the knife-edged severance  
Of sun from shadow where the trees begin,  
The blessed cool at every pore caressing us  
-An angel has no skin.

They see the Form of Air; but mortals breathing it  
Drink the whole summer down into the breast.  
The lavish pinks, the field new-mown, the ravishing  
Sea-smells, the wood-fire smoke that whispers Rest.  
The tremor on the rippled pool of memory  
That from each smell in widening circles goes,  
The pleasure and the pang --can angels measure it?  
An angel has no nose.

The nourishing of life, and how it flourishes  
On death, and why, they utterly know; but not  
The hill-born, earthy spring, the dark cold bilberries.  
The ripe peach from the southern wall still hot  
Full-bellied tankards foamy-topped, the delicate  
Half-lyric lamb, a new loaf's billowy curves,  
Nor porridge, nor the tingling taste of oranges.  
-An angel has no nerves.

Far richer they! I know the senses' witchery  
Guards us like air, from heavens too big to see;  
Imminent death to man that barb'd sublimity  
And dazzling edge of beauty unsheathed would be.  
Yet here, within this tiny, charmed interior,  
This parlour of the brain, their Maker shares  
With living men some secrets in a privacy  
Forever ours, not theirs.

C S Lewis

## **Prelude to Space**

An Epithalium

So Man, grown vigorous now,  
Holds himself ripe to breed,  
Daily devises how  
To ejaculate his seed  
And boldly fertilize

The black womb of the unconsenting skies.

Some now alive expect  
(I am told) to see the large,  
Steel member grow erect,  
Turgid with the fierce charge  
Of our whole planet's skill,  
Courage, wealth, knowledge, concentrated will,

Straining with lust to stamp  
Our likeness on the abyss-  
Bombs, gallows, Belsen camp,  
Pox, polio, Thais' kiss  
Or Judas, Moloch's fires  
And Torquemada's (sons resemble sires).

Shall we, when the grim shape  
Roars upward, dance and sing?  
Yes: if we honour rape,  
If we take pride to Ring  
So bountifully on space  
The sperm of our long woes, our large disgrace.

C S Lewis

## Re-adjustment

I thought there would be a grave beauty, a sunset splendour  
In being the last of one's kind: a topmost moment as one watched  
The huge wave curving over Atlantis, the shrouded barge  
Turning away with wounded Arthur, or Ilium burning.  
Now I see that, all along, I was assuming a posterity  
Of gentle hearts: someone, however distant in the depths of time,  
Who could pick up our signal, who could understand a story. There won't be.

Between the new Hembidae and us who are dying, already  
There rises a barrier across which no voice can ever carry,  
For devils are unmaking language. We must let that alone forever.  
Uproot your loves, one by one, with care, from the future,  
And trusting to no future, receive the massive thrust  
And surge of the many-dimensional timeless rays converging  
On this small, significant dew drop, the present that mirrors all.

C S Lewis

## Science-fiction Cradlesong

By and by Man will try  
To get out into the sky,  
Sailing far beyond the air  
From Down and Here to Up and There.  
Stars and sky, sky and stars  
Make us feel the prison bars.

Suppose it done. Now we ride  
Closed in steel, up there, outside  
Through our port-holes see the vast  
Heaven-scape go rushing past.  
Shall we? All that meets the eye  
Is sky and stars, stars and sky.

Points of light with black between  
Hang like a painted scene  
Motionless, no nearer there  
Than on Earth, everywhere  
Equidistant from our ship.  
Heaven has given us the slip.

Hush, be still. Outer space  
Is a concept, not a place.  
Try no more. Where we are  
Never can be sky or star.  
From prison, in a prison, we fly;  
There's no way into the sky.

C S Lewis

## **The Condemned**

There is a wildness still in England that will not feed  
In cages; it shrinks away from the touch of the trainer's hand,  
Easy to kill, not easy to tame. It will never breed  
In a zoo for the public pleasure. It will not be planned.

Do not blame us too much if we that are hedgerow folk  
Cannot swell the rejoicings at this new world you make -  
We, hedge-hogged as Johnson or Borrow, strange to the yoke  
As Landor, surly as Cobbett (that badger), birdlike as Blake.

A new scent troubles the air -- to you, friendly perhaps  
But we with animal wisdom have understood that smell.  
To all our kind its message is Guns, Ferrets, and Traps,  
And a Ministry gassing the little holes in which we dwell.

C S Lewis

## The Country of the Blind

Hard light bathed them—a whole nation of eyeless men,  
Dark bipeds not aware how they were maimed. A long  
Process, clearly, a slow curse,  
Drained through centuries, left them thus.

At some transitional stage, then, a luckless few,  
No doubt, must have had eyes after the up-to-date,  
Normal type had achieved snug  
Darkness, safe from the guns of heavn;

Whose blind mouths would abuse words that belonged to their  
Great-grandfathers, unabashed, talking of light in some  
Eunuch'd, etiolated,  
Fungoid sense, as a symbol of

Abstract thoughts. If a man, one that had eyes, a poor  
Misfit, spoke of the grey dawn or the stars or green-  
Sloped sea waves, or admired how  
Warm tints change in a lady's cheek,

None complained he had used words from an alien tongue,  
None question'd. It was worse. All would agree 'Of course,'  
Came their answer. "We've all felt  
Just like that." They were wrong. And he

Knew too much to be clear, could not explain. The words --  
Sold, raped flung to the dogs -- now could avail no more;  
Hence silence. But the mouldwarps,  
With glib confidence, easily

Showed how tricks of the phrase, sheer metaphors could set  
Fools concocting a myth, taking the worlds for things.  
Do you think this a far-fetched  
Picture? Go then about among

Men now famous; attempt speech on the truths that once,  
Opaque, carved in divine forms, irremovable,  
Dear but dear as a mountain-  
Mass, stood plain to the inward eye.

C S Lewis

## **The Meteorite**

Among the hills a meteorite  
Lies huge; and moss has overgrown,  
And wind and rain with touches light  
Made soft, the contours of the stone.

Thus easily can Earth digest  
A cinder of sidereal fire,  
And make her translunary guest  
The native of an English shire.

Nor is it strange these wanderers  
Find in her lap their fitting place,  
For every particle that's hers  
Came at the first from outer space.

All that is Earth has once been sky;  
Down from the sun of old she came,  
Or from some star that travelled by  
Too close to his entangling flame.

Hence, if belated drops yet fall  
From heaven, on these her plastic power  
Still works as once it worked on all  
The glad rush of the golden shower.

C S Lewis