SONGS OF MYSELF

THOMAS MacDONAGH

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1910

Ilona Macardle

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BY

THOMAS MacDONAGH

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Two of these poems have appeared in "The Nation" (London), and are here reprinted by the kind permission of the Editor.

IN THE STORM

With laughing eyes and storm-blown hair
  You came to my bedside;
I thought your living soul was there,
  And that my dreams had lied;

But ere my lips had power to speak
  A word of love to you,
The moonlight fell upon your cheek,
  And it was of death's hue.

Sudden I heard the storm arise,
  I heard its summons roll:
Wistful and wondering your eyes
  Were fading from my soul.

The moonlight waned, and shadows thick
  Went keening on the storm—
Ah! for the quiet that was quick,
  The cold heart that was warm!

IN ABSENCE

Last night I read your letters once again—
Read till the dawn filled all my room with grey;
Then quenched my light and put the leaves away,
And prayed for sleep to ease my heart's great pain.
But ah! that poignant tenderness made vain
My hope of rest—I could not sleep or pray
For thought of you, and the slow, broadening day
Held me there prisoner of my throbbing brain.

Yet I did sleep before the silence broke,
And dream, but not of you—the old dreams rife
With duties which would bind me to the yoke
Of my old futile, lone, reluctant life:
I stretched my hands for help in the vain strife,
And grasped these leaves, and to this pain awoke.

IN AN ISLAND

'Mid an isle I stand,
Under its only tree:
The ocean around—
Around life eternity:
'Mid my life I stand,
Under the boughs of thee.

AFTER A YEAR

After a year of love
Death of love in a day;
And I who ever strove
To hold love in sure life
Now let it pass away
With no grief and no strife.

Pass—but it holds me yet;
Love, it would seem, may die;
But we can not forget
And can not be the same,
As lowly or as high,
As once, before this came.

Never as in old days
Can I again stoop low;
Never, now fallen, raise
Spirit and heart above
To where once life did show
The lone soul of my love.

None would the service ask
That she from love requires,
Making it not a task
But a high sacrament
Of all love's dear desires
And all life's grave intent.

And if she asked it not?—
Should I have loved her then?—
Such love was our one lot
And our true destiny.
Shall I find truth again?—
None could have known but she.

And she?— But it is vain
Her life now to surmise,
Whether of joy or pain,
After this borrowed year.
Memory may bring her sighs,
But will it bring a tear?

What if it brought love back?—
Love?—Ah! love died to-day—
She knew that our hearts lack

One thing that makes love true.
And I would not gainsay,
Told her I also knew.

And there an end of it—
I, who had never brooked
Such word as all unfit
For our sure love, brooked this—
Into her eyes I looked,
Left her without a kiss.

THE SUICIDE

Here when I have died,
  And when my body is found,
They will bury it by the road side
  And in no blessèd ground.

And no one my story will tell,
  And no one will honour my name:
They will think that they bury well
  The damned in their grave of shame.

But alike shall be at last
  The shamed and the blessèd place,
The future and the past,
  Man's grace and man's disgrace.

Secure in their grave I shall be
  From it all, and quiet then,
With no thought and no memory
  Of the deeds and the dooms of men.

IN FEVER

I am withered and wizened and stiff and old,
Sick and hot, and I sigh for the cold,
For the days when all of the world was fresh
And all of me, my soul and my flesh,—
When my lips and my mouth were cool as the dew,
And my eyes, now worn, as clear, as new.
I wish I were lying out in the rain
In the wood at home, that the waters might strain
And stream through me— But here I lie
In a clammy room, and my soul is dry,
And shall never be fresh again till I die.

IN DREAD

All day in widowed loneliness and dread
  Haunted I went, fearing that all your love
Was dead, and all my joy, as sudden dead
  As once were sudden born our joy and love.

A DREAM OF AGE

I dreamt last night that I was very old,
And very lonesome, very sad of heart;
And, shunning men, dwelt in a place apart
Where none my barren sorrow might behold;
There brooded grim beside my hearthstone cold
Cold days of shadow, dying, till with flame
Of happy memory once more you came
With laughing eyes and hair of burning gold.

—O eyes of sudden joy! O storm-blown hair!
O pale face of my love! why do you rise
Amid the haunting spectres of despair
To trouble their gaunt vigil with my cries?—
In tears I woke and knew the dream was true:
My youth was lost, and lost the love of you.

THE ANCHORET

I saw thy soul stand in the moon
  Last night, the live-long night—
The jewels of Heaven in thy hand,
Thy brow with cherub coronal spanned,
  And thou in God's light.

Hell is the demons' gulfèd lair
  Beneath the flaming bars;
And Heaven, whereto thou goest soon,
Beyond thy dwelling in the moon
  And beyond the stars.

But Purgatory, thine old abode
  Since Life's impure delay,
Towers athwart the circling air
Whose topmost Heaven-reaching stair
  Thou dost tread to-day.

Thy soul within the moon doth stand—
  How many years of toil!
And I must bear a greater load,
And I must climb a harder road
  Ere God me assoil!

IN CALM

Not a wind blows and I have cried for storm!
The night is still and sullen and too bright,
Still and not cold,—the airs around me warm
Rise, and I hate them, and I hate the night.

Yet I shall hate the day more than the hush
Henceforth forever, as life more than death;—
And I have cried to hear the wild winds rush
To drown my words, to drown my living breath.

IN SEPTEMBER

The winds are in the wood again to-day,
  Not moaning as they moan among bare boughs
In winter dark, nor baying as they bay
  When hunting in full moon, the spring to rouse;

Nor as in summer, soft: the insistent rain
  Hisses the woe of my void life to me;
And the winds jibe me for my anguish vain,
  Sibilant, like waters of the washing sea.

AT THE END

The songs that I sing
Should have told you an Easter story
Of a long sweet Spring
With its gold and its feasts and its glory,

Of the moons then that married
Green May to the mellow September,
Long noons that ne'er tarried
Life's hail and farewell to remember—

But the haste of the years
Had rushed to the fall of our sorrow,
To the waste of our tears,
The hush and the pall of our morrow.

OUR STORY

There was a young king who was sad,
  And a young queen who was lonely;
They lived together their busy life,
  Known to each other only,—

Known to each other with strange love,
  But with sighs for the king's vain sorrow
And for the queen's vain loneliness
  And vain forethought of the morrow.

After a barren while they died,
  In death they were not parted:
Now in their grave perhaps they know
  Why they were broken-hearted.

TO EOGHAN

Will you gaze after the dead, gaze into the grave?—
Strain your eyes in the darkness, knowing it vain?
Strain your voice in the silence that never gave
To any voice or yours an answer again?

She whom you loved long years is dead, and you
Stay, and you cannot bear it and cry for her—
And life will cure this pain—or death: you too
Shall quiet lie where cries no echo stir.

DEATH

Life is a boon—and death, as spirit and flesh
are twain:
The body is spoil of death, the spirit lives on
death-free;
The body dies and its wound dies and the
mortal pain;
The wounded spirit lives, wounded im-
mortally.

THE RAIN IT RAINETH

The homeless bird has a weary time
  When the wind is high and moans through
    the grass:
The laughter has fainted out of my rime—
  Oh! but the life that will moan and pass!

An oak-tree wrestling on the hill,
  And the wind wailing in the grass—
And life will strive with many an ill
  For many a weary day ere it pass—

Wailing, wailing a winter threne
  In the clouds on high and low in the grass;
So for my soul will he raise the keen
  When I from the winds and the winters
    pass.

DEATH IN THE WOODS

When I am gone and you alone are living here still,
You'll think of me when splendid the storm is on the hill,
Trampling and militant here—what of their village street?—
For the baying of winds in the woods to me was music sweet.

Oh, for the storms again, and youth in my heart again!
My spirit to glory strained, wild in this wild wood then,
That now shall never strain—though I think if the tempest should roll
I could rise and strive with death, and smite him back from my soul.

But no wind stirs a leaf, and no cloud hurries
the moon;
I know that our lake to-night with stars and
shadows is strewn—
A night for a villager's death, who will
shudder in his grave
To hear—alas, how long!—the winds above
him rave.

How long! Ah, Death, what art thou, a
thing of calm or of storms?
Or twain—their peace to them, to me thy
valiant alarms?
Gladly I'd leave them this corpse in their
churchyard to lay at rest,
If my wind-swept spirit could fare on the
hurricane's kingly quest.

And sure 'tis the fools of knowledge who
feign that the winds of the world
Are but troubles of little calms by the greater
Calm enfurled:

I know them for symbols of glory, and echoes
of one Voice dread,
Sounding where spacious tempests house the
great-hearted Dead.

And what but a fool was I, crying defiance to
Death,
Who shall lead my soul from this calm to
mingle with God's very breath!—
Who shall lead me hither perhaps, while you
are waiting here still,
Sighing for thought of me when the winds
are out on the hill.

AT DAWN

Lo! 'tis the lark
Out in the sweet of the dawn!
Springing up from the dew of the lawn,
Singing over the gurth and the park!—
O Dawn, red rose to change my life's grey
    story!
O Song, mute lips burning to lyric glory!
O Joy! Joy of the lark,
Over the dewy lawn,
Over the gurth and the park,
In the sweet of the dawn!

MY POET

—My poet the rose of his fancies
  Wrought unwritten in verse,
And left but the lilies and pansies
  To strew his early hearse.

—The master-dream of your poet
  Has perished for ever then?
—What know we? Should we know it
  If it were born again?

REQUIES

He is dead, and never word of blame
  Or praise of him his spirit hears,
Sacred, secure from cark of fame,
  From sympathy of useless tears.

A SONG OF ANOTHER

FOR EOGHAN

Often enough the leaves have fallen there
Since life for her was changed to other care;
Often enough the winds that swept the wave
And mocked my woe, have moaned over her
grave.

I will return: Death now can do no more
Anywhere on these seas or on the shore,
Since he has stilled her heart. I cannot
mourn
For her on these wild seas: I will return.
Death now can do no more. And what but
Death
Has any final power? He ceased her breath,
Striking her dumb lips pallid; quenched the
lights
That were, O Death, my stars of the wild
nights

Out on rude ocean—quenched and closed her
eyes
That were, O Death, my stars of the dawn-
rise!

Long years ago her quiet form was thrust
Into the quiet earth; low in the dust
Her golden hair lies tarnished every thread
These lone long years, tarnished and dim
and dead.

I will return to the far valley, blest
With her soul's presence, now her home of
rest—
(Where life was peace to her now death is
peace)—
There by her grave my pilgrimage may
cease;
There life, there death, in my vain heart
shall stir
No passion but the old true love of her.

A WOMAN

Time on her face has writ
  A hundred years,
And all the page of it
  Blurred with his tears;

Yet in his holiest crypt
  Treasuring the scroll,
Keeps the sweet manuscript
  Fair as her soul.

A DREAM OF BEING

I walked in dream within a convent close,
And met there lonely a familiar nun;
Then in my mind arose
A vehement memory strife
With doubt of being, arose and was fought and was won.
Trembling I said: "O mother of my life!"
And she in tears: "At last my fond heart knows—
Surely I am the mother of my son!"
And greeted me in dear maternal wise,
And asked me all the story of my days,
Silently garnering my quick replies,
Shamefastly holding breath upon my praise
Of him to whom she plighted the world's vows
(So ran the tale), my father, her loved spouse.

It did not then seem strange that this should be
(A long time there we stayed in company)
Until she pondering said:
"And yet I chose the better part, my child,
When from that world's love and from thee I fled,
Leaving the wild
That I could never till aright and dreaded,
And sought this marriage garden undefiled,
The virgin of the Lover whom I wedded.

"Twenty years old I hither came,
Twenty years ago:
My child, if thy life were the same
As in this tale thou dreamest now to know,
These twenty years had been thine age to-day."
I answered her: "It is my age to-day."

And then a while she mused, nor marked the call
Of one monotonous bell, nor heard, within the hall
Hard by, the lonesome-sounding late foot-fall

Of one nun passing after the rest were
gone:
Within they filled their places one by one,
And a few wondered doubtless with vague
surmise,
Less on response devout,
Why still she tarried at that hour without.
I heard their voices rise and fall and rise
In their long prayer like quiet faded sighs
Calling from hearts that lost
Their passion long ago,
That are not toss'd
On waves that make them crying go
Ever at all or make them happily go.
She, quiet thus also,
And something sad,
Spoke on: "My child, what if I had
Chosen the other part, sought that world's
love
Of him thou tell'st me of,
And thus had stayed with thee?—
It had not then been better and not worse
(I pray that thus it be),
No blessing and no curse,
Making the only difference of thee,

No difference at all (that is) or false or true,
To welcome or to rue,
No difference, whether thou came to be
A man for men to see
Or all a dream, my dreaming soul to fill
With fancy thus an hour so waywardly.
I turn back to the plot of life I till
To fruit of such due virginal gifts
As my soul lifts
Within this Heaven's house
For twenty years unto my Lover and Spouse:
I here return, and leave the dreamèd plot
Which I have laboured not,—
Leave thee, my child, who never hast been born.
Alas! Alas! that so thou art forlorn,
Since I must lose thee so once more
As I have lost thee (thus my dream) before,—
Since I must lose thee . . ." "Ah, dream of life!" said I,
"What if the dream be life, and the waking dream?"
Her eyes did wistful seem,
A moment wistful, then with patient sigh,
"If thou dream so," she said, "thou art indeed my dream.

Strange that a dream like thee can dream again,
And dreaming yearn for being!
And, vision-seen, can yearn for seeing!
My child, thou standest always in God's ken,
In ken of me an hour, never of men;
And thou wilt now from mine depart,
And wilt return
Seldom to mind of me, never to heart;
Nor shall I wonder or mourn,
For it is but the difference of thee
Who art now, art not in eternity;
Nor wonder ever thus of him whose praise
Thou didst rear so in story of thy days:
He may be vain as thy vain days that burn,
Small hour by hour, in other than life's fire,
Though with my life coëval they expire:
Life thou dost run, and he,
Only in dream of me,—
Who is the dreamer?" she faltered. I, poor ghost,
Left her there pondering as the vespers ceased;
And sisters hurrying forth met me almost
Where I passed slowly out, from the dream released.

TWO SONGS FROM THE IRISH

I

(*Is truagh gan mise i Sasana*)

'Tis a pity I'm not in England,
  Or with one from Erin thither bound,
Out in the midst of the ocean,
  Where the thousands of ships are drowned.

From wave to wave of the ocean
  To be guided on with the wind and the rain—
And: O King! that Thou might'st guide me
  Back to my love again!

II

(*Táid na réalta 'na seasamh ar an aer*)

The stars stand up in the air,
  The sun and the moon are gone,
The strand of its waters is bare,
  And her sway is swept from the swan.

The cuckoo was calling all day,
  Hid in the branches above,
How my stóirín is fled far away—
  'Tis my grief that I give her my love!

Three things through love I see,
  Sorrow and sin and death—
And my mind reminding me
  That this doom I breathe with my breath.

But sweeter than violin or lute
  Is my love, and she left me behind—
I wish that all music were mute,
  And I to all beauty were blind.

She's more shapely than swan by the strand,
  She's more radiant than grass after dew,
She's more fair than the stars where they
    stand—
  'Tis my grief that her ever I knew!

JOHN-JOHN

I dreamt last night of you, John-John,
  And thought you called to me;
And when I woke this morning, John,
  Yourself I hoped to see;
But I was all alone, John-John,
  Though still I heard your call:
I put my boots and bonnet on,
  And took my Sunday shawl,
And went, full sure to find you, John,
      To Nenagh fair.

The fair was just the same as then,
  Five years ago to-day,
When first you left the thimble men
  And came with me away;
For there again were thimble men
  And shooting galleries,
And card-trick men and Maggie men
  Of all sorts and degrees,—
But not a sight of you, John-John,
      Was anywhere.

I turned my face to home again,
  And called myself a fool
To think you'd leave the thimble men
  And live again by rule,
And go to mass and keep the fast
  And till the little patch:
My wish to have you home was past
  Before I raised the latch
And pushed the door and saw you, John,
    Sitting down there.

How cool you came in here, begad,
  As if you owned the place!
But rest yourself there now, my lad,
  'Tis good to see your face;
My dream is out, and now by it
  I think I know my mind:
At six o'clock this house you'll quit,
  And leave no grief behind;—
But until six o'clock, John-John,
    My bit you'll share.

The neighbours' shame of me began
  When first I brought you in;
To wed and keep a tinker man
  They thought a kind of sin;

But now this three year since you're gone
  'Tis pity me they do,
And that I'd rather have, John-John,
  Than that they'd pity you.
Pity for me and you, John-John,
      I could not bear.

Oh, you're my husband right enough,
  But what's the good of that?
You know you never were the stuff
  To be the cottage cat,
To watch the fire and hear me lock
  The door and put out Shep—
But there now, it is six o'clock
  And time for you to step.
God bless and keep you far, John-John!
      And that's my prayer.

TO A WISE MAN

If I had spent my talent as you spend,
  If you had sought this rare thing sought
    by me,
We had missed our mutual pity at life's end,
  As we have missed only our sympathy.

OFFERING

To her who first unmade a poet and gave
  Love and unrest instead of barren art,
Who dared to bring him joy and then to brave
  The anger and the anguish of his heart,

Knowing the heart would serve her still; and then
  Who gave back only what to art belongs,
Making the man a poet over again,—
  To her who gave me all I give these songs.

ENVOI

I send these creatures to lay a ghost,
  And not to raise up fame!
For I shrink from the way that they go almost
  As I shrink from the way that they came.

To lose their sorrow I send them so,
  And to lose the joys I held dear;
Ere I on another journey go
  And leave my dead youth here.

For I am the lover, the anchoret,
  And the suicide—but in vain;
I have failed in their deeds, and I want them yet,
  And this life derides my pain.

I suffer unrest and unrest I bring,
  And my love is mixed with hate;
And the one that I love wants another thing,
  Less unkind and less passionate.

So I know I have lost the thing that I sought,
  And I know that by my loss
I have won the thing that others have bought
  In agony on this cross.

But I whose creed is only death
  Do not prize their victory;
I know that my life is but a breath
  On the glass of eternity.

And so I am sorry that I failed,
  And that I shall never fulfil
The hope of joy that once I hailed
  And the love that I yearn for still.

In a little while 'twill be all the same,
  But I shall have missed my joy;
And that was a better thing than fame
  Which others can make or destroy.

So I send on their way with this crude rime
  These creatures of bitter truth,
Not to raise up fame for a future time,
  But to lay the ghost of my youth.

. . . . . .

And now it is time to start, John-John,
  And leave this life behind;
We'll be free on the road that we journey on
  Whatever fate we find.

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