

# ANTIQUITIES

Early Poems By Margaret Menamin



*Guinevere* by William Morris

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The earliest of these poems goes back exactly 50 years, and the latest of them is about 40 years old. I am posting them here to give you an idea of the poems I was writing then and to allow you to compare with those I am writing now.

**MY FIRST PUBLISHED POEMS – *SEVENTEEN*, June 1956:**

**Two Poems**

**BY MARGARET DOBKINS, AGE 18, STEELVILLE, MISSOURI**

**The Wayfarer**

You ask me which of these  
Small roads that lie before you  
Is the one that you should travel.  
I cannot say precisely  
Which is the shortest or smoothest;  
But this I know:  
I have traveled them all,  
And Hope walked before me  
With a long candle.

**Nocturne**

The cold round moon's hypnotic eye  
Is pale with some unwhispered want.  
Thin ghost-clouds, set adrift in sky,  
Nudged by wind, are hesitant.

Silver drips from the fingers of willows;  
Grim shadows on the road are cast.  
Children, frightened, sink in their pillows  
As strange wild horses gallop past.

## WIND STALKER

The sun is an Apache child  
Who rises yawning from his bed  
And swings his tawny brown, half wild  
Young legs into a dawn of red.

All day toward the western sky  
He stalks the wind with boyish cunning,  
Till, almost creeping, by and by,  
He falls asleep, worn out from running.

(Published in *The Missouri Conservationist*)

## COMPLETENESS IS NOT BEAUTY

Completeness is not beauty. Not a spring  
Goes by that is more beautiful to see  
Than winter-into-spring. The yet-to-be  
Of rain approaching is a lovely thing,  
More beautiful by far than drops that ring  
Upon the eaves. And, beckoning to me,  
My lighted window, as I turn the key,  
Is somehow warmer than the entering.

So is it with your beauty. Oh, I know  
That you are young and plain, and have not this  
Maturity of which we sit here prating;  
Yet you shall bloom in time, my dear, although  
You cannot find your metamorphosis  
But half so lovely as I find the waiting.

(Third prize, *Seventeen* Magazine's Poetry  
Contest, 1957. Published in *Seventeen* in  
September of that year.)

**TO HUNGARY**  
**Christmas 1956**

Your cry falls heavy on my sorrowing ears  
this Christmas season, and I ache for you.  
Your blood has drenched me; your dead heroes strew  
my stricken heart; you bathe me in your tears.  
Yet, hopefully recalling yesteryears,  
the bells peal their old carols to renew  
the faith of nations and direct them to  
Judæa's Star before it disappears.

“Good will to men,” they ring, and “Peace on earth.”  
Where is this peace when brothers hate and kill?  
My heart is sad that men must murder still;  
is this the way we hail the Christ-Child's birth?  
O Hungary! I hear your anguished voice  
above the carols—I cannot rejoice!

## **SPRING WALKING**

Hear spring walking  
Through the night,  
Creeping in the  
Semi-light;

Silver-splashed, she  
Tiptoes. Hark:  
Hear her stealing  
Through the dark.

(Published in *The Missouri Conservationist*)

## ATLANTA

Yours is the song of my undoing,  
The moon of my whims;  
Yours are the charms of a serpent's wooing,  
A sword carved with hymns.

Yours is a poison served in sauces  
In ruby red bowl,  
Yours the delight over all my losses;  
Your hands pinch my soul.

Once, only once, I escaped you halfway,  
Before I was old,  
But you overtook me and flung in my pathway  
Three apples of gold.

## **WINDY NIGHT**

Wind must be a hungry thing to cry aloud at night  
Like a gaunt grey cat out on a rainy London street;  
It must suck its stomach in and draw its belt up tight  
When there is no nourishment but rain and cold and sleet.

Ravenous, it roams the street with empty, gusty jaws;  
Round the fed and sleeping town it circles like a wreath.  
Some poor beggar out tonight will falter, quake, and pause  
And so fall prey to unseen hands and break on icy teeth.

## **HECATE**

Silken and strong  
And soft as myth  
I wove a song  
To hang you with.

Sparkling as rain  
In crystal bowl,  
I brewed a bane  
To eat your soul.

And in my desire  
To see you burned,  
I built a fire  
That on me turned.

## FINIS

Don't waste your tears on me  
And sing me no sad song;  
I'll rally presently,  
I shall not love you long.

Don't bother to be kind  
Or play at being witty;  
I've had your love, you mind—  
I do not need your pity.

The best thing, and the worst,  
To say for this small sorrow  
Is, you stopped loving first  
And I shall stop tomorrow.

## DEVIL'S RING

On this unhallowed ground let no man walk.  
Take care no pilgrim sings as he goes by  
this place, and let no merry children cry  
beneath these wasting trees! Oh, never talk  
aloud beneath this moon, and do not tread  
upon this spot where demons late at night  
whirl to exhaustion, and with dawn's first light  
shrink back to dwell among the fettered dead.

This is a devil's ring; they say that deep  
beneath its very center lies asleep  
a man no more remembered of his race  
who spoke things which were not yet taken place.  
*They say that once when he was very young  
the devil marked a cross upon his tongue.*

## GHOST GALLEY

Behind a group of scattered, ragged clouds  
the moon darts, white and naked, out of sight,  
hoping that their thin and threadbare shrouds  
will screen her safely from the watchful night  
while, dumb with wonder, she beholds the scene  
spread out below: the bluffs, the hidden bay,  
the silent water tranquil and serene,  
the port asleep and seeming far away.

A galley is at anchor in the dark.  
The Jolly Roger flies upon her mast,  
while white-faced, dreamy buccaneers row past  
on almost soundless oars, and disembark  
within the sheltered undergrowth and rocks  
where long ago they left a buried box.

## EARTHBOUND

Oh God, forgive this blasphemy, but I  
Have no desire of heaven. There must be  
Another place available to me  
Who cannot put the earth so quickly by.  
My heart is wrapped around a winter sky,  
I gnaw at greyness; and I could not free  
Myself from rainy autumns easily.  
It will be hard enough for me to die.

Then when you count your faithful, count this one  
Among them, but I pray you, take me not.  
Instead, allot me some small earthly spot  
Where I may feel the rain and wind and sun.  
If heaven be lovelier than the soil I stroll,  
I cannot hold it in my shallow soul.

(Published in *The Missouri Conservationist*  
and *The Izaak Walton Magazine*, 1961)

## CORN SHOCKS

You may no longer touch me: I have seen  
White corn shocks misty in the grey pre-dawn,  
Mysterious and pagan and serene  
In rites before some man-forgotten god;  
And I have wandered mesmerized between  
The rows of skirted dancers strangely drawn  
To life, that when the sun went down, had been  
No more than crisp dead leaves upon the sod.

Such scenes were not intended for the eyes  
Of man to know, yet I have seen and told.  
I am not of my kindred as before,  
For suddenly I am a wiser wise  
And suddenly I am an older old,  
And you may never touch me any more.

(Published in *The Missouri Conservationist*)

## SECRET

I caught your heart and hid it in an oak,  
Deep in the center of a lonely wood,  
And there, I thought, the gloomy solitude  
Would shroud it with a heavy dismal cloak.  
For there no flowers grew, no voices spoke,  
And leaves had drifted like a silken hood  
Upon the sleeping earth. There hidden stood  
Your heart, mine, secret, where no morning woke.

For long I dreaded to return, afraid  
Of that dark place. And then, all caution flinging  
Behind me, I was once more in the glade  
Where I had left my prize. And there came winging  
A joyous song which now the sun betrayed  
Out of the tree where there were no birds singing.

## INDIAN PIPES

What silent warriors steal  
at night through the dead leaves,  
moccasined and soundless?

What old bones rise,  
awakening in the smell of the damp earth,  
to share your fragile stems?

What old troubles are settled,  
what old hates are buried  
in the forest at night?

What ghost fingers mark you  
that you blacken  
at the touch of mortal hands?

(Published in *The Missouri Conservationist*)

## WILD GEESE

Never a spring wind shakes the pussy willow,  
Never white moonlight sifts across my bed  
That I do not lie and listen in my pillow  
For the sound of the wild geese overhead.

Never do I waken to hear them returning,  
Throw back the sheets and stare out at the night,  
That I am not seized with a wild strange yearning  
And lift up my arms in attempted flight.

(Published in *The Missouri Conservationist*)

## **HOLD BACK**

To D.H.

Today, when the years between us matter little,  
I cannot forget the too inevitable day  
Which will snatch you and hurry you struggling away,  
Bowing your beautiful head and making brittle  
Your body's perfect timber. I behold  
With what stark anguish I shall look at you  
Some morning after time has stolen through  
Leaving you not quite young and me not quite old.

No hound of hell shall pass me, then, to follow  
The heels of tomorrow that pound across today;  
I shall run till my flesh is knots and my hair goes gray,  
I shall seek you until my eyes are dark and hollow.  
And you—drag you feet, if there's pity in you, and  
Put up a fight, and hold back an open hand.

## A SMALL PLACE

It has taken me again, this wanting to wander  
I thought I had pushed through my pockets  
The last time I ran through the town, passing under  
The tall clocks that chatter like crickets,  
And took to the highway in the wind and rain.  
I thought it would not happen to me again.

This time I cannot go. No part of me wonders  
If the sparrows sound different in Bury  
Or the poppies are rain-whipped in Flanders.  
Though my heart shall be broken to tarry,  
The place I seek is far from anywhere:  
A small place, heart-shaped, with no thoroughfare.

## BALLAD

They tell a tale in a wandering caravan  
When day is over  
Of a woman who swore her love to a gentleman  
And took for a lover  
A lean, dark man with sinews of bronze and tan,  
And bore the child of a ragged gypsy rover.

High at her window she sits in her dull brocade  
Above the town;  
When the dust of the street sifts up to the heavy shade  
She pulls it down  
And writes in the dust the name of the man she'd trade  
For a glimpse of a face that is hard and wild and brown.

The villagers pass and look up when they hear the sighs  
Of the proud cold dame  
Who calls her small dark son with the chestnut eyes  
By a noble name,  
And wonder among themselves that she sits and cries  
And watches the street with a face full of love and  
shame.

And they whisper among themselves in the dusty street  
When the sun hangs red  
That she watches her lord's white mares go on feather  
feet  
To the stable shed  
And waits for her eyes and the proud dark driver's to  
meet  
But he whistles and slaps the reins and looks on ahead.

## SUMMER IS A DIMENSION

Summer is a dimension. There are those  
Who enter it indifferently and pass  
As carelessly across the watchful season  
As they would cross a footpath, and emerge  
Without a splash of color on their souls.

And there are those—like you—who step into  
The small mysterious world and suddenly  
Stop short and sniff with shivering recognition,  
Realizing too late that they are caught,  
And are suspended like an orange moth  
Against a locust thorn.

And all their songs  
There after are strange music, known to none  
But maybe children, and their eyes are blind  
To all but perfect things, and all their words  
Henceforward may be eaten like sweet fruit  
(And all their words are rich and ripe and round,  
And sweet upon their lips like strawberries).

## SONNETS FOR THREE DEAD ENCHANTRESSES

### 1

#### Guinevere

Perhaps his hand touched yours and suddenly  
the heavy rings were no more gold but lead  
upon your fingers, and your heart flew free  
and you forgot you were a queen and wed.  
Perhaps some courteous toast to you was sent  
down the long table in the great cold hall:  
you caught a look of longing and torment  
you had long missed in any eyes at all.

When you were found, the kindnesses were few.  
“Oh traitorous knight!” they cried. “Oh faithless queen!”  
Of course, you should have kept your marriage vow  
though Arthur’s arms were cold as death to you;  
still, I think I know how it might have been,  
if that is any comfort to you now.

2  
Circe

I know what Circe did not think of then:  
that dampened fires may be revisited,  
and if well tended and with patience fed  
until they spark and burst to flame again,  
may blaze more brilliantly, perhaps, than when  
the first bright coal broke on the shallow bed.  
“A cinder is a cinder,” Circe said,  
and filled her pigsties with discarded men.

Yet was it after all, perhaps, of this  
she thought, and set her eyes against the morn  
and could not face the second, knowing kiss  
or bear that this day’s Greek could take with scorn  
what yesterday’s had trembled lest he miss?  
And are all fires false that are reborn?

3

**Mary, Sister of Martha**

And you as well have had your secret hour  
out of the trivial ticking of the years,  
after you found there wasn't any power  
in open smiles or covert sighs or tears,  
and cut your heart down to its proper quiet,  
pretending worship had erased desire.  
Oh, I was never fooled a minute by it,  
for you were never candlelight but fire.

What was the day you found your promised peace:  
some stolen unrecorded day so sweet  
that thorns dropped figs and olive branches curled,  
or did your empty hands find scant release  
the day you took your hair and washed his feet  
who wanted nothing but to save the world?

## RECLUSE

I am akin to velvet moles  
And small grey mice that peek and gnaw.  
I lose my days in darkened holes  
And serve no ordinary law.

In darkest night I venture forth  
From my impregnable retreat  
That none may spy me on the earth  
And snatch it from beneath my feet.

I steal the crumbs from mankind's table  
And hoard them carefully, lest he  
Should come to think them valuable  
And seek to have them back from me.

If, stiffening in the chill of night,  
You touch me suddenly, be kind  
And do not face me with a light.  
I mean no harm, and I've gone blind.

## CHRYSANTHEMUMS

How cold the streets: chrysanthemums are cut  
And borne away in armful avalanches.  
I watch them go, I see the doors go shut  
On heavy-headed wealth with stems like branches.

I hear their little angry sharp-toothed cries  
And feel their savage hands against the skies.  
The killer-saviors do not realize  
To what cold kiss they've set their fevered eyes.

O angry little virgins, saved to die!  
Another week will droop your proud warm heads,  
But not before your cheated god comes by  
To wander in and out of barren beds.

## DOCUMENTARY FILM

To freeze brief moments to eternities  
Is cruel, and the bitterest means employed  
To torment hearts with stagnant memories  
Is this relentless preying celluloid.  
The haunted tyrant, no more conscienceless,  
Looks back on his depravity laid bare;  
The sage laments his early idleness,  
The hag remembers that she once was fair.

But chiefest of the tortures is the dead  
Returned like fire into the rested brain.  
I wept for one whose riddled husband fled  
His own death-anguish in the mud and rain  
Of some stormed hill: years afterward, she said,  
She watched in horror as he died again.

## CHRISTMAS SONG

Before this day became the pawn of fools  
And Christians laid their questionable claim,  
In timelost forests by long buried pools  
A group of worshippers without a name  
Propitiated gods with ancient fire  
And loosed their savage hymns upon the air,  
And I would be by all men's creeds a liar  
If I did not remember you from there.

You were not worshiper; you sat alone  
And in a vanished language (fools say dead)  
Addressed me from your elemental throne.  
I heard your voice and knew not what you said,  
But I came gladly to the sacred stone  
And placed a crown of holly on your head.

## **EPITAPH**

The earth proclaims its secret bones,  
And he who often hid in stones  
Would not betray a stone to be  
Betrayed of his secrecy.

Wherefore he went some place too deep  
For earth to keep or not to keep,  
And we must write upon the air:  
All of him that was here is there.

## CHRISTMAS ACROSTIC

Missouri, having hosted one more year,  
Extends a carol to her sons and daughters.  
Rivers cannot repress the song of cheer  
Running beneath their frozen surface waters:  
You in your houses there, come out and hear.

Christmas must not become a housebound thing  
Hung with the wreaths and ribbons on the walls:  
Rivers and trees have something left to sing  
If you will leave the prison of your halls,  
Something of quiet joy and peace on earth  
That's better sung in earth's own atmosphere.  
Missouri sends her song, for what it's worth,  
And it's the same this year as any year:  
Sons and daughters, come outside and hear.

(Published in *The Missouri Conservationist* and  
used as the Missouri Conservation Commission's  
Christmas Card, December 1963.)

## A LEGEND

There was a man who fed himself a dream  
Until its secret flavor grew too sweet  
For one man's keeping and he spread it out  
That other men might taste his wine and meat

And to his table came no man but worms  
And all the spilling of his heart fell wasted  
To crawling gluttons gaping in the dust  
And was devoured untreasured and untasted

And when his plate was empty of his dream  
He walked into the silent wood alone  
And laid him down to starve beside a stream  
And dashed his empty hands against a stone

And with his final motion raised his eyes  
And saw around his broken hands a flood  
Of ivory moths just near enough to touch  
And spread their fragile wingtips with his blood

Then through the forest scattering like flame  
They brushed the trees with crimson every one  
And spread against the listening sky his dream  
And left a cloud of banners on the sun.

**THE MAN WHO HAD THE TREES**  
**A Tribute to Riley Gladden**

When I was just a child who'd join his walk  
And try to charm from him those scraps of talk  
That fell with such a wise and woodsy ease,  
I knew him as the man who had the trees.

The bundles puzzled me. And then one day  
I learned that he was giving them away:  
The man who walked with forests in his hands  
Was changing naked fields to timberlands.

I never had a place to plant a tree.  
But in the later years he came to me  
With sacks of winter seed that I could throw  
To keep the birds from starving in the snow.

And when my backyard bobwhites visited  
His feeding-ground, or his came down and fed  
Along my fence, their diet was the same;  
Our separate hands fought hunger in one name.

The week before he died I heard him say,  
Giving another wilderness away,  
"Yes, you can pay me. When the trees are grown,  
Bring me the tallest pine's most perfect cone."

The trees are yet to grow, the cones to fall;  
Beside the trees our children will grow tall.  
The earth will not forget whose woods are these  
Or why the birds still feed beneath the trees.

## **SMALL WONDER CHRIST WAS CELIBATE**

Small wonder Christ was celibate. He saw  
What woman is, and what she is to be.  
Beyond the stature given her in law  
He saw the depth of her capacity.  
And yet he knew that, being as she is,  
She could not find herself except alone.  
No patience, no most careful word of his  
Would open her, no seeking but her own.

And so, since he could never gain the ears  
That mothers' tales and sister's songs had plied  
Since Eve herself, he left her to her years,  
Knowing that in his love he would have tried  
To fill with wine a vessel used to ale  
While other husbands watched his marriage fail.