

Classic Poetry Series

Ethelwyn Wetherald
- poems -

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Ethelwyn Wetherald(26 April 1857 - 9 March 1940)

Agnes Ethelwyn Wetherald was a Canadian poet.

She was born at Rockwood, Ontario, the daughter of Rev. William Wetherald, a Quaker minister. She was educated at the Friends' Boarding School in Union, New York, and at Pickering College. She sold her first poem to St. Nicholas Magazine at 17, and soon was contributing to many publications throughout Canada and the United States, including *The Globe*, *The Week*, and *Rose-Belford's Canadian Magazine*. She co-wrote a novel, *An Algonquin Maiden* (1887), with Graeme Mercer Adam, and in 1895 published her first volume of poetry.

She worked for several decades as a proofreader, journalist, and editorial assistant at newspapers in Ontario and the north-eastern United States. For a time she 'conducted the Women's Department' of the under the pseudonym "Bel Thistlethwait." She adopted a child, Dorothy, in 1911 when she was 54, and in 1921 published a book of children's verse, *Tree-Top Mornings*, dedicated to Dorothy.

Reviewing her 1907 book, *The Last Robin*, *The Globe* pronounced: "The salient quality of Miss Wetherald's work is its freshness of feeling, a perennial freshness, renewable as spring. This has a setting of harmonious form, for the poet's ear is delicately attuned to the value of words, both as to the sound and the meaning.... The sonnets are an important part of the volume, and, to some minds, will represent the most important part. Miss Wetherald's sonnets are flowing in expression and harmonious in thought; some are beautiful."

The *Dictionary of Literary Biography* calls the best of her poems "musical, restrained, and precise," and "equal to much of the work of her better-known Canadian contemporaries such as Archibald Lampman, Bliss Carman, and Duncan Campbell Scott." On occasion, it adds, "her themes and images recall the poetry of Emily Dickinson."

Absence

Dear grey-winged angel, with the mouth set stern
And time-devouring eyes, the sweetest sweet
Of kisses when two severed lovers meet
Is thine; the cruelest ache in hearts that yearn,
The fears that freeze, the hopes that leap and burn,
Thine-thine! And thine the drum-and-trumpet beat
Of hearts that wait for unreturning feet,
When comes at last the hour of their return.
Of Love's fair ministers thou art the chief.
To jaded souls, asleep beside their vows,
Thou givest hopes, keen joys and vague alarms;
Beneath thy touch the brown and yellow leaf
Turns to pink blossom, and the spring-bright boughs
Frame lovers running to each other's arms.

Ethelwyn Wetherald

At Waking

When I shall go to sleep and wake again
At dawning in another world than this,
What will atone to me for all I miss?
The light melodious footsteps of the rain,
The press of leaves against my window-pane,
The sunset wistfulness and morning bliss,
The moon's enchantment, and the twilight kiss
Of winds that wander with me through the lane.
Will not my soul remember evermore
The earthly winter's hunger for the spring,
The wet sweet cheek of April, and the rush
Of roses through the summer's open door;
The feelings that the scented woodlands bring
At evening with the singing of the thrush?

Ethelwyn Wetherald

Earth's Silences

How dear to hearts by hurtful noises scarred
In the stillness of the many-leavèd trees,
The quiet of green hills, the million-starred
Tranquillity of night, the endless seas
Of silence in deep wilds, where nature broods
In large, serene, uninterrupted moods.
Oh, but to work as orchards work—bring forth
Pink bloom, green bud, red fruit and yellow leaf,
As noiselessly as gold proclaims its worth,
Or as the pale blade turns to russet sheaf,
Or splendid sun goes down the glowing west,
Still as forgotten memories in the breast.
How without panting effort, painful word,
Comes the enchanting miracle of snow,
Making a sleeping ocean. None have heard
Its waves, its surf, its foam, its overflow;
For unto every heart, all hot and wild,
It seems to say, 'Oh, hush thee! hush, my child!'

Ethelwyn Wetherald

February

O Master-Builder, blustering as you go
About your giant work, transforming all
The empty woods into a glittering hall,
And making lilac lanes and footpaths grow
As hard as iron under stubborn snow,
Though every fence stand forth a marble wall,
And windy hollows drift to arches tall,
There comes a might that shall your might o'erthrow.
Build high your white and dazzling palaces,
Strengthen your bridges, fortify your towers,
Storm with a loud and a portentous lip;
And April with a fragmentary breeze,
And half a score of gentle, golden hours,
Shall leave no trace of your stern workmanship.

Ethelwyn Wetherald

If One Might Live

If one might live ten years among the leaves,
Ten—only ten—of all a life's long day,
Who would not choose a childhood 'neath the eaves
Low-sloping to some slender footpath way?
With the young grass about his childish feet,
And the young lambs within his ungrown arms,
And every streamlet side a pleasure seat
Within the wide day's treasure-house of charms.
To learn to speak while young birds learned to sing,
To learn to run e'en as they learned to fly;
With unworn heart against the breast of spring,
To watch the moments smile as they went by.
Enroofed with apple buds afar to roam,
Or clover-cradled on the murmurous sod,
To drowse within the blessed fields of home,
So near to earth—so very near to God.
How could it matter—all the after strife,
The heat, the haste, the inward hurt, the strain,
When the young loveliness and sweet of life
Came flood-like back again and yet again?
When best begins it liveth through the worst;
O happy soul, beloved of Memory,
Whose youth was joined to beauty as at first
The morning stars were wed to harmony!

Ethelwyn Wetherald

In The Crowd

Here in the crowded city's busy street,
Swayed by the eager, jostling, hasting throng,
Where Traffic's voice grows harsher and more strong,
I see within the stream of hurrying feet
A company of trees in their retreat,
Dew-bathed, dream-wrapped, and with a thrush's song
Emparadizing all the place, along
Whose paths I hear the pulse of Beauty beat.
'Twas yesterday I walked beneath the trees,
To-day I tread the city's stony ways;
And still the spell that o'er my spirit came
Turns harshest sounds to shy bird ecstasies,
Pours scent of pine through murky chimney haze,
And gives each careworn face a woodland frame.

Ethelwyn Wetherald

Legacies

Unto my friends I give my thoughts,
Unto my God my soul,
Unto my foe I leave my love—
These are of life the whole.
Nay, there is something—a trifle—left;
Who shall receive this dower?
See, Earth Mother, a handful of dust—
Turn it into a flower.

Ethelwyn Wetherald

Mother And Child

I saw a mother holding
Her play-worn baby son,
Her pliant arms enfolding
The drooping little one.
Her lips were made of sweetness,
And sweet the eyes above;
With infantile completeness
He yielded to her love.
And I who saw the heaving
Of breast to dimpling cheek,
Have felt, within, the weaving
Of thoughts I cannot speak;
Have felt myself the nestling,
All strengthless, love-ensiled;
Have felt myself the mother
Abrood above her child.

Ethelwyn Wetherald

My Orders

My orders are to fight;
Then if I bleed, or fail,
Or strongly win, what matters it?
God only doth prevail.
The servant craveth naught
Except to serve with might.
I was not told to win or lose,–
My orders are to fight.

Ethelwyn Wetherald

Pluck

Thank God for pluck—unknown to slaves—
The self ne'er of its Self bereft,
Who, when the right arm's shattered, waves
The good flag with the left.

Ethelwyn Wetherald

Prodigal Yet

Muck of the sty, reek of the trough,
Blackened my brow where all might see,
Yet while I was a great way off
My Father ran with compassion for me.
He put on my hand a ring of gold,
(There's no escape from a ring, they say)
He put on my neck a chain to hold
My passionate spirit from breaking away.
He put on my feet the shoes that miss
No chance to tread in the narrow path;
He pressed on my lips the burning kiss
That scorches deeper than fires of wrath.
He filled my body with meat and wine,
He flooded my heart with love's white light;
Yet deep in the mire, with sensual swine,
I long—God help me!—to wallow to-night.
Muck of the sty, reek of the trough,
Blacken my soul where none may see.
Father, I yet am a long way off—
Come quickly, Lord! Have compassion on me!

Ethelwyn Wetherald

The Followers

One day I caught up with my angel, she
Who calls me bell-like from a sky-touched tower.
'Twas in my roof-room, at the stillest hour
Of a still, sunless day, when suddenly
A flood of deep unreasoned ecstasy
Lifted my heart, that had begun to cower,
And wrapped it in a flame of living power.
My leader said, 'Arise and follow me.'
Then as I followed gladly I beheld
How all men baffled, burdened, crossed or curst,
Clutch at an angel's hem, if near or far;
One not-to-be-resisted voice, deep-belled,
Speaks to them, and of those we call the worst,
Lo, each poor blackened brow strains to a Star!

Ethelwyn Wetherald

The Hay Field

With slender arms outstretching in the sun
The grass lies dead;
The wind walks tenderly and stirs not one
Frail fallen head.
Of baby creepings through the April day
Where streamlets wend,
Of child-like dancing on the breeze of May,
This is the end.
No more these tiny forms are bathed in dew,
No more they reach
To hold with leaves that shade them from the blue
A whispered speech.
No more they part their arms and wreath them close
Again, to shield
Some love-full little nest—a dainty house
Hid in a field.
For them no more the splendour of the storm,
The fair delights
Of moon and star-shine, glimmering faint and warm
On summer nights.
Their little lives they yield in summer death,
And frequently
Across the field bereaved their dying breath
Is brought to me.

Ethelwyn Wetherald

The House Of The Trees

Open your doors and take me in,
Spirit of the wood;
Wash me clean of dust and din,
Clothe me in your mood.
Take me from the noisy light
To the sunless peace,
Where at midday standeth Night,
Signing Toil's release.
All your dusky twilight stores
To my senses give;
Take me in and lock the doors,
Show me how to live.
Lift your leafy roof for me,
Part your yielding walls,
Let me wander lingeringly
Through your scented halls.
Ope your doors and take me in,
Spirit of the wood;
Take me—make me next of kin
To your leafy brood.

Ethelwyn Wetherald

The Indigo Bird

When I see,
High on the tip-top twig of a tree,
Something blue by the breezes stirred,
But so far up that the blue is blurred,
So far up no green leaf flies
'Twixt its blue and the blue of the skies,
Then I know, ere a note be heard,
That is naught but the Indigo bird.
Blue on the branch and blue in the sky,
And naught between but the breezes high,
And naught so blue by the breezes stirred
As the deep, deep blue of the Indigo bird.
When I hear
A song like a bird laugh, blithe and clear,
As though of some airy jest he had heard
The last and the most delightful word;
A laugh as fresh in the August haze
As it was in the full-voiced April days;
Then I know that my heart is stirred
By the laugh-like song of the Indigo bird.
Joy on the branch and joy in the sky,
And naught between but the breezes high;
And naught so glad on the breezes heard
As the gay, gay note of the Indigo bird.

Ethelwyn Wetherald

The Screech-Owl

Hearing the strange night-piercing sound
Of woe that strove to sing,
I followed where it hid, and found
A small soft-throated thing,
A feathered handful of gray grief,
Perched by the year's last leaf.
And heeding not that in the sky
The lamps of peace were lit,
It sent abroad that sobbing cry,
And sad hearts echoed it.
O hush, poor grief, so gray, so wild,
God still is with His child!

Ethelwyn Wetherald

The Snow Storm

The Great soft downy snow storm like a cloak
Descends to wrap the lean world head to feet;
It gives the dead another winding sheet,
It buries all the roofs until the smoke
Seems like a soul that from its clay has broke.
It broods moon-like upon the Autumn wheat,
And visits all the trees in their retreat
To hood and mantle that poor shivering folk.
With wintry bloom it fills the harshest grooves
In jagged pine stump fences. Every sound
It hushes to the footstep of a nun.
Sweet Charity! that brightens where it moves
Inducing darkest bits of churlish ground
To give a radiant answer to the sun.

Ethelwyn Wetherald

The Song Sparrow's Nest

Here where tumultuous vines
Shadow the porch at the west,
Leaf with tendril entwines
Under a song sparrow's nest.
She in her pendulous nook
Sways with the warm wind tide,
I with a pen or a book
Rock as soft at her side.
Comrades with nothing to say,
Neither of us intrudes,
But through the lingering day
Each of us sits and broods.
Not upon hate and fear,
Not upon grief or doubt,
Not upon spite or sneer,
These we could never hatch out.
She broods on wonderful things:
Quickening life that belongs
To a heart and a voice and wings,
Then in the summer night,
When I awake with a start,
I think of the nest at the height—
The leafy height of my heart;
I think of the mother love,
Of the patient wings close furled,
Of the sky that broods above,
Of the Love that broods on the world.

Ethelwyn Wetherald

The Wind Of Death

The wind of death, that softly blows
The last warm petal from the rose,
The last dry leaf from off the tree,
To-night has come to breathe on me.
There was a time I learned to hate
As weaker mortals learn to love;
The passion held me fixed as fate,
Burned in my veins early and late;
But now a wind falls from above—
The wind of death, that silently
Enshroudeth friend and enemy.
There was a time my soul was thrilled
By keen ambition's whip and spur;
My master forced me where he willed,
And with his power my life was filled;
But now the old-time pulses stir
How faintly in the wind of death,
That bloweth lightly as a breath.
And once, but once, at Love's dear feet
I yielded strength and life and heart;
His look turned bitter into sweet,
His smile made all the world complete;
The wind blows loves like leaves apart—
The wind of death, that tenderly
Is blowing 'twixt my love and me.
O wind of death, that darkly blows
Each separate ship of human woes
Far out on a mysterious sea,
I turn, I turn my face to thee!

Ethelwyn Wetherald

Winter

Now that the earth has hid her lovely brood
Of green things in her breast safe out of sight,
And all the trees have stripped them for the fight,
The winter comes with wild winds singing rude,
Hoarse battle songs-so furious in feud
That nothing lives that has not felt their bite.
They sound a trumpet in the dead of night
That makes more solitary solitude.
Against the forest doors how fierce they beat!
Against the porch, against the school-bound boy
With crimson cheek bent to his shaggy coat.
The earth is pale but steadfast, hearing sweet
But far-how far away!-the stream of joy
Outpouring from a bluebird's tender throat.

Ethelwyn Wetherald