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CHILDREN IN THE APPLE TREE

by

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INTRODUCTION

The poems in this group do not share a conscious aim; if there is one theme it is the celebration of life. The poems see within the general motion a particular permanence: the poet says, Look at this.

These poems begin in everyday experience. Their form is meant to be essentially a natural and colloquial form; they are intended to affect different people in different ways, giving to their readers the sense of plurality—of physical plurality, the thing seen from all sides, and of spiritual and emotional plurality, the thing seen in many ways.

Most of these poems fall into three groups. The poems of the first group are those of discovery and acceptance: "The Fountain," "The Pear Tree," "Allegro," "Rejoice For A Freshly Painted House," "I Sing Celebrating," "This Is Your Life..." and "The Sign Says...."

The poems of the second group—"The Old House," "Woman Away From The Loom," "Among Friends," "The Party," "The Office," "On Burning the Christmas Tree"—mourn the death-in-life of our time, the transformation of individual human beings into parts of an inhuman machine.

The poems of the third group—"The Painter," "What The Fortune Teller Told," "Your Life Lies Thirty Years Around," "This Is Your Life...," "O Self, Let Me Be..." and "On Burning the Christmas Tree"—represent a search for some order within which the individual can be both responsible and natural.

Some of the poems belong to more than one group. "This Is Your Life..." belongs to both the first and the third, "On Burning the Christmas Tree" to both the second and third.

One source of the poems is life, with its contradictions, the arrow pointing both ways; another source is life at one remove, the poems of other poets--Auden, Yeats, Moore and Muir are particularly sympathetic to me, and must surely have had some influence on these poems. But the form of the poem is often determined by what it comes from in life.

The underpunctuation of the poems is, of course, deliberate. The movement in the poems is intended to go from one line on to the next without any stop for breath, the pauses often falling in the middle of the line. The rhythmic effect of the poems depends upon a great deal of expressive variation in the scansion: the rhythms are always slightly "off," since they are intended to have something of the speed and sweep and homogeneity of actual experience, of colloquial speech. Rhymes are usually interior, slant, or in some way irregular: consonance and alliteration are often substituted for ordinary end rhyme.

The title of the poems, Children in the Apple Tree, refers to the unconscious or intuitive life--gifts that are always there for us, if we will only look for them--that are alluded to in T. S. Eliot's "Little Gidding":¹

...Through the unknown, remembered gate
When the last of earth left to discover
Is that which was the beginning;
At the source of the longest river
The voice of the hidden waterfall
And the children in the apple tree
Not known because not looked for
But heard, half-heard, in the stillness
Between two waves of the sea.

¹T. S. Eliot, Four Quartets (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1943), p. 39.

What the Fortune Teller Told

See the lines here in your hand
Crossing themselves like stars
Signing your name in odd directions,
Peaks of instinct piled like sand,
This one bars you, land over love
Holding roses stuck on arbors,
Spring lambs seeing storms above
Leaving sailships tied in harbors;
What you think you think
Will always take its toll,
As long as you live you will
But you'll always live in haste,
Your life will not be marked by grace
Nor faith measured by the glow of phlox
Nor time told by the shepherd's clocks;
Quartets and dancing in the grass
Alas, I do not see, but your life may change
In the living, your heart and fate
Become one wife, but the questions
Asked of your heart by your fate
Will never be answered
Until oh, too late.
Tears you will feel wet

But never look to see
 That when they dry cheekwise
 They lie collected there
 Leaving the heart in debt.
 Living the moon by quarters
 Knowing it brings the morning tide
 Forgetting lonely beds are never cold
 And love's cheeks seldom dried,
 You won't ever grieve too much,
 Nor question ghosts so deeply
 That the angels weep, you'll fold
 Your wings at break of day and
 Still your shade return to ask
 The way, in your final rising
 —Let your soul and body wake as one.

Your Life Lies Thirty Years Around

Your life lies thirty years around
In rings accountable as a chopped-down tree;
You can tell each by its residue,
Compressed in smell and texture, taut
And milked out as a saddish smile,
Knowing less about the sun's worth
Than living from change snatched
From plaid pocket or locket
Lined with hope.
Whatever there is to say
You are afraid to say
Leaning over frontwards
To hide a smile or choke a face
Made to protect the need to say
More than should be said. The shock
Of saying what is thought penetrates
The shell. The hollow beetle-case
Becomes that way from having grown
Too thickly discontent with being.
The lifelight is shut out until
The ego falls apart to make
A little pile of pink powder;
Or, looking out from barred, mascaraed eyes

Is wary and weary of form, but too tired
To throw it away. Still self asserts itself
In easy earthworm stretches; can't help
But believe in it, growing like wintergrass,
Out of tone somehow with the season, silly
A little bit like chives in a grocery-store pot.
The whole thing is strained and drained
Patted and pruned and uplifted, until you think
That what comes through the sieve is not worth saving.
The one to grow on you can hold on to
Tighter than the others, because it does not know
You well, calls no names even to friends, until
Self, the same, rebelling still,
Compliant only in relation to the whole,
At last accepts its circumstance becoming soul.

Allegro

Crying

High and clear on the Maypole is knowing.

In it I see eggs in the windy grass of Easter,

In it the turpentine is making its own perfume,

My name is mentioned at midnight.

The sound of the typewriter writing out its tune

Is not the rhythm of the afternoon.

Still watchfully the cat waits for the tub to fill, the Times

To come. The water rises slowly up the side (the Times has come)

Almost as slow as sadness, sliding through a thick, protected

Consciousness, this I can face

As readily as burning old love-letters by the pound.

I sing in praise

Of all good things: the sun

And Kleenex and shaking hands, I want

To be with you,

To taste first radishes, reflecting nothing

But delight at the first fitting of a gown.

O please ask me for directions,

I can tell you where, love--

That the cream is thick from whipping

Turns my Jonah to a dove.

To live fulfilled is to live by chance,

Accounting change a friend,

Loving still the Maypole as it trembles

From the cradle to the bridal bed.

The Fountain

Walking down the steps toward the fountain
There was the pillar I had stood by once
Waiting for you, and watched the water fall,
People throwing pennies in to wish, not knowing
You were there until you spoke, I turned
Surprised, and then we looked. That was
The only look that day, between our eyes.
It was as if that look showed us so much
That then we had to wait till we caught up
To seeing it.

We stood there for a moment, looking
In accord enough to know what not to do;
You took my arm, or gave me yours,
Whichever, and we walked away together
For the first time.

Walking along the shore together hand in hand
We parted only long enough to fill a willow
Basket full of shells, and speak of names
Not written by the sea-grass in the sand.
The pipers hurried across the land,

The Painter

Finding in the wave's fall, treasure
 They will not tell of, nor will I.
 That was all, until it was late
 --And you, calling me three times back
 Before I closed the door.

The sea, the light, the rocks,
 The clouds, the waves arrange themselves
 Without expedience in perfect pattern
 The beauty of water chasing themselves
 Before they run into the surf.
 The rock sits still, her feet spread out
 Her look far out to sea, balancing
 Her eye and water easily on her knee.
 On her spread leg the grapes lie waiting.
 In the shadow of the rock there is a picture
 The boys their grapes at the wine table
 They have emptied of its heat. Behind the boat
 The open handle close to the deck length
 Whispering together, a strength in standing
 Under our back umbrella, her shadow cast wet,
 She gazes at her side, already the woman
 Who brings the eyes who wait to come by sea
 In riding in his second sailing, his first daughter

The Painter

From the painter's point of view
Perhaps the scene is too picturesque.
He stands, his easel at an angle
Opposite the way the bathers walk
The slight incline to the beach.
The sea the light the rocks
The chapel ruins arrange themselves
Without expedience in perfect pattern
The family of seven crossing themselves
Before they run into the surf.
The cook sits still, her feet spread out
Her look far out to sea, balancing
Her cup and saucer easily on her knee
On her aproned lap the grapes lie waiting.
In the shadow of the rock there is a picnic.
The boys throw stones at the wine bottle
They have emptied of its heat. Beside the boat
The women huddle close to its cool length
Whispering together, a stranger is sketching
Under her beach umbrella, her bathing suit wet,
Sea-goggles at her side, already the boatman
Who brings the ones who want to come by sea
Is making up his second sailing, his first daughter

Is betrothed, she bends over her embroidery
In the shade. The boatman's middle daughter,
The one he named the boat for, who glistens,
Moves and smiles, showing her tender nape to the sun--
Only when she swims she shows she knows
Her powers, the waves she throws herself into
Conspire, form arcs as limitless as hers.
The baby sister, walking at the water's edge
Calls her to come back with tears.
The roof to the concession stand, the blackness
Of the shrimp pots, the lovers in the rocks
The heart and letters cut out in the cactus leaf
--Each takes its place in the picture.
For a moment the painter is tempted to leave the scene
To put itself on record, the boats, the lovers
Eating fruit, combining in the waning light.
It hardly could be formal by design
On a beach like this, of bathers, who have artists
Trying to fit them into space, though they
Are here forever by design, the human one:
To take the pleasure on its own, and on the beach
To worship in the sun.

The Office

After the subway's catacombing ride, the office
Riding up the elevator shaft, the same
One every day, and after three thousand
And sixty-two, the residue of former days
Carries you up of its own volition
Saying the same good mornings
Remarking on the weather to the same
Ones, holding back the spirit
Of work at work to work.

After the ramp the keylock, almost unaware
The body follows, it knows its paces well,
Sometimes the self will lag behind,
Almost unwilling to walk down the stairs,
Looking into windows on the wall,
Breathing near-names on frosted glass.
After eight hours the working day is over
Sponged and sealed into outgoing mail,
No changes, even on copies, how easy
It is to file your life away, or fold it
Neatly into a drawer
With hand-lotion and a towel to be
Taken up tomorrow.
Even the cleaning-women

Arriving at seven can giggle while banging
 Their buckets, but you, unfeeling
 In your new hair-do--
 At least you look that way in navy blue--
 Weep hollowly in Kleenex
 This springish night, having no benches in the park
 To remember, no time-and-a-half to consider,
 And besides, the man is married.

Tomorrow because the train comes in
 You will be on it, and willing or not
 The day will be ready for you,
 While you, desiring less each day,
 Will not complain.
 Tonight in spite of television
 You will knit a little longer.

Among Friends

I sit on the sofa listening:
A sad-mouthed young man is speaking;
As social beings we exchange our views,
Gesticulate, have mutual reactions,
Light the other's cigarette, hoping
We are friends, make prayers for the life
Of conversation. The attention of the room
Shifts for a moment to a woman who tries
To tell us what she feels: she remembers
A face in the mirror laughing in surprise
At hair dried curly, a tale of a toe
That made them laugh more, snow
Falling on the street between them
Intending to separate, only mated them
The more--she looks about the room
At the faces there, she wonders
Where he is, what windows he looks out--
What footstool holds his feet, what lamp
Shines down upon the page he reads,
Who reads the notes he wrote in margins
In hooked black letters--

Suddenly the trees all gave a sigh together:
He stood there filling the narrow doorway.
Then with a cautious hardened heart
She tells herself, Immobile is the soul
Within those bones, the beautiful bones--
But all of that was long ago.
Victor or victim, he used to say,
The choice is made, we do not make it.
The sad-mouthed young man begins again,
Like a blessing rising up the smoke
Soon fills the room, the heart that leaps will not be heard.

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The Party

A girl I could not like
Stands by the window like a mannequin,
Sees from the corner of her eye
Into the room striped alternately,
The talk out smokes the smoke,
The room is stark as understated prose
Except where (just as if she came
With the room) the girl stands
Lyric in cadmium red, uncertain
As the blood-price on her head.
The girl (who really is a woman--
I can see that now) says slowly
Once, her voice like musk:
I like it here, or else, I like you
To a man standing near. I could
Ask who she is; everyone knows her,
Probably, her story, job, loves, why
She stands so, posed and alone,
And surely not wanting to be
A background for everyone
Who understands her or thinks he does:
But whoever understands, still, let her keep
Her skein secret while others sleep, and spin
A web out on her own.

I Sing Celebrating

I sing celebrating
Whatever is, the old men's red roses,
The minting of new coins, maidens,
Their drapery joining them on a freize,
Strawberries moist in boxes lined with leaves,
Picnics in the steeple's shadow, psalms of David
Chanted by children dancing round the Maypole,
To beans, to birds, to darts, to old men's toasts,
To fruit canned over kettles, and rolled up sleeves,
To steam, to whatever makes it, wants it, takes it,
Not holding back; I participate by seeing it:
The little dog's teething, the lover's quick
Breathing, all of it whether we listen or not:
Shut your eyes the shadows will outline themselves
Close your ears the echoes throb, say nothing,
Still the words all wait in line, ready to march
Forth from your brain, whether you know it and feel it
And say it, you recognize its texture is life
Green and growing, against introspection and death,
Warm with the breath of the hearth.

The Old House

The parking lots encroach upon old houses
Patient, shuttered against long years of summers
Decades of birds splash the petaled water
Of their marble bath; the lions prepare
To leave the lawn they guarded for a hundred years
The tractors trample down the grass, the few remaining trees
Where yesterday the magical feet of lovers and children walked
Caught in a careless web of self, throwing themselves
Upon the ground, down on the golden mattress the leaves
Made in the fall, no more are secrets told, no whispers
In the dying summer grass; across the road the light
Glares out of houses where it never shone before,
Storms and rains rage down the roots of the old trees,
Half in, half out of the mired clay, they
Trail their tendrils like witch's hair in the light
Between thunderings, neighbor meets neighbor on the street
But does not speak; inside the house on the sofas,
Built in the house so large no auctioneer could squeeze
Them through the door, there is conversation;
Congenial spirits sit, backed by heavy velvet

Between rooms, and talk; they notice things about intruders
 They could be sued for if they were ever overheard--
 Outside on the lawn, the lions gone at last, two collies
 From neighboring houses conspire to terrify,
 In silent toast the one-eyed
 Drink blind the other eye.

The Sign Says...

The sign says Eggs for Sale
The next says, Minnows, and underneath
With modesty, Worms, you see
The goat who guards the yard
Is truculent, he is on speaking terms
With the white-faced calf, as are you
Who think domestic animals are not venturesome
Still, within their bounds, in spring, they're
Apt to kick their heels up, spill a little
Blood, lock horns or sing, it does
Not leave their ladies unaware.
The hidden lake lies glinting
In the high spring sun
The jonquils wave on the windy lawn
In a long uncertain line, by the road
The old pine peers out to watch
Whatever passes, pass, this one
Old tree whose leaves are long
Unchanging green in any season
Beneath it all, the sad undertone
The pine cone calling, the squirrels
Answer each to each.

Woman Away From The Loom

Unsinister she stands and sees the days
 Go swinging by like acrobats upon a rope
 Forgetting all of this is not immediate
 But of the whole far-reaching search for truth
 And whether you decide: foregone for Lent
 Or known for Valentine won't be seen
 On the big rug.
 Uncryptically she waits and senses stir and pull
 While fate concurs and love abates, and you
 Narcissus do not demur.

ii

It is a time to see the bird and worm
 Fly by the window in simple relationship
 She shall not question certainties:
 The artichoke will wear its tail
 The almond still will keep her furry coat
 The fish though baked retains his eye
 Blue birds upon a Persian bowl
 In flying pattern wing to wing
 Command insight in perfect flight
 Plump cheeks of a white milk pitcher

Bound in gold sing forth delight.
 But then the flying squirrels begin:
 Thump out their tune, hold contests
 In the attic, the cat who dogs her footsteps
 Dies, children cry out in sleep
 Cannibals and crows exalt their state
 Cousins look in mirrors, and then
 With cousins mate, the nursery rhymes
 Come truer than all histories.

iii

The plate waits full in the warming-place
 The vinegar's mother comes early,
 The eggs refuse their hiding place,
 While whippoorwills keep lonely wives awake
 The showers drip with nylon shirts
 As snow falls on the aerials in May
 The lady policemen, carrying stopsigns
 Hurry to board the town-bound trollies
 Gray with self-pity, she holds
 The old familiar phrases close
 Playing them over and over like
 Phonograph records, reviving old powers
 For a little while, memory, a clever one

Knows when to leave out the nightmares
In the middle, unaware, she sees the cat's-tails
Thicken as they walk from room to room.
Standing vulnerable as St. Sebastian
Waiting for the arrows, she feels a fury
She does not know at what without her glasses
Something has robbed her of her sense of power
There is no magic anymore
(Senses like rooms conditioned by air
Feel unbreathed to the human breath)
There are few windows to look out
They all look in to show a pretty picture.
Roses in a vase their lives prolonged
By aspirin, there she stands in the uncertain light
A madonna without hands, the wind
That blew her mantle into shape was mild.

iv

Outside in the snow where birds and cats
Have walked the moles pop up their heads
To talk, the snow melts on the painted roof
Running down leaves, bares the place
Where the opossum yawned last fall.
In the corner of the white window frame

Small cobwebs seem blacker in the snowlight
Where the fly is caught.

v

The red bird cries
The green plant dies
The roses climbing on the red barn fall
The honeycomb is open like the tomb
Pops forth life's illusions like Lazarus
From the dead, not ready, opened up
With essence and emptiness revealed
Out of time in nature and the season.

vi

She sees the firelight dancing on the backs of books
It waits behind vases, gay as narcissus
Let out of the closet, the shell is pushed away--
New air, blowing in the winter window
Is strong and sure as Spring.

On Burning the Christmas Tree

We stood on the brown needles and heard the tree
Catch fire before we saw the flame, we heard the crackle
Of the leaves and saw the tinsel curl and smoke,
Somehow the tree was more itself outdoors again and free
Than it had ever been inside in ceremony.
We all stood there and watched the berries burning
The smoking tree, the dog and cat, the child, the man
The burning Christmas tree and me, watching the smoke
Rise from the embers.
I see it rising now above the other trees left standing
Now there is a mist hanging over the remaining trees,
I think of the mist that floats above us there,
The shadow that it makes
That leaves us natural in our shape
And blessed in our places for the space we take.

The Lost Dog

Before the end when he ran round and round the outdoor chimney
His look was long, and did not know me as I stood there
Watching with the cat: he ran away down deep into the woods,
Once returned before he ran away again for good, I heard him bark
--Looking out, there the little dog stood. I called him
But he would not come. He ran in his strange triumph down the road
With snow on either side, banking his journey. He never came back
Again, at night I hear him calling in the snow,
The cat walks out on the porch to listen,
She waits with me while I call and call in the cold
But he never comes. We shiver even when the door is shut,
Back by the fire the cat and I exchange our looks. Later
When we hear him call again, we don't go out,
Don't go to bed, we just sit there, I
Poke up the fire, and hook a row or two
Of my warm hearth rug. And then I go to bed.

The Pear Tree

She bells and blossoms like a bride
Her skirts held out in dancer's stance
The light she looks for is enough
To bear her pears, her fruit is instinct
Her pears are golden, pale and slender
Their stems are silver in the sun
Her beauty is pure and one
Beneath her tender crinoline
The gray cat waits on the green carpet
His boots are white, he guards the trunk
She keeps her secrets packed in
The jealous pines press in to sigh
They envy her fruit her frame her delicate way
The air she makes no effort to retain
She knows her youth is passing in a day
From out the corner of her eye she sees
The swollen red clay mound, the shadows
Of tomorrow's blossoms scattered on the ground.

O Self, Let Me Be...

O self, let me be without thinking
Let me not remember the clown-suit
Or the chopping-board, let there be
No sharp declension between days
And ways of living days, I look around
For a set for filling in what
Better would be free and spilling over
Watering the why and saving up
Candle-ends hoping for holidays
No frost on the fruit blossoms
Let me leave mind alone, be wedded
To morning in the evening, feel
All there is to feel at break of day
Find glory in the half-light, love
The shadow that the sun makes
As it hesitates before it rises
--The eye will see and not refuse
The song bird that the cat has killed.

O rib, do not try so,
Let yourself drift, dream if you may,
Draw the water from the well, weep,

Let knowledge rise within you, accounting to
 Nothing but the sun, let miracles abound
 Uncounted, the unexpected happen, bridges,
 Ladders, webs stay in their places.
 --Without the self accepted
 The blessing cannot come.

This Is Your Life...

This is your life: a cat-cry low
Outside the window, wanting to come in
He sits, in what sun shines
By the big wooden bowl with tangerines
Piled near the old magazines, places
Marked for clipping, we humor
The rocking horse, his bell is quiet,
Propped by the open fire, a conversation held in by the grate
And pinecones found in piney woods by hand.
The telephone ringing (someone asks questions
You can answer in your sleep and wish you had),
Slicing citron thin for cakes, transferring
Wandering Jew from yellow pot to vase,
The mail with letters thick as little magazines,
Bottling herbs, unbottling wine for droppers-in,
And lists, and telephone again, and will you come,
You will, and how in all the midst of this you want
To write it down, what is there here for you to share,
Nothing remiss and echoes to spare, No, no, not there,
See, see, the pretty squirrel in the tree. But why
Is there something you must tell, what turns
Tomatoes orange in the winter window? Enough
To ride on Sunday, water over the falls again,

The ivy thick and wet, will it suffice?
 The fig leaves wither before first frost,
 On that side of the house there is no sun
 But on the other side, in the thinning light
 No higher than the water hydrant, and holding on,
 A little girl waits for a drop to fall,
 Finger held to the spout, and caught in time,
 Her cap awry, nothing askance in all of this
 You do not turn away.

Rejoice For A Freshly Painted House

Rejoice for a freshly painted house,
For berry bushes quivering with birds,
For the tire made into a swing
For sun on the cat's fur making her roll
For feigned battle between friends,
The little dog rolls in the dry brown grass
Holding on to a bone he had forgot,
The little girl laughs, holding a willow basket,
The little dog laughs, he keeps his nose down,
Teasing and waiting, her necklace of spools
He keeps his eye on, this small retriever . . .
Wild onions wave a welcome to this backyard paradise,
Woodsmoke sifts through the sand-sieve,
Circles the cat's grave, stops before the wagon's warning
Sign--the crossed pine boughs. The pear tree stands
A lady alone in the pine grove; the sparrow tells the cat
To go away, while I, the dog's head in my lap,
Sit by, and silently survey my riches like a queen.
The barn is white, the henhouse whiter still,
The plants in the greenhouse grow wild,
Commending season's haste; birdsong itself
Is mild surprise to her who celebrates
All living things, blessed by the sun's insistence.