

VIGILS

Siegfried Sassoon

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VIGILS

BY

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To
HESTER

An Emblem

Poet, plant your tree
On the upward way;
Aromatic bay
Plant, that men may see
Beauty greenly growing
There in storm or shine,
And through boughs divine
Freedom bravely blowing.

Vigils

Lone heart, learning
By one light burning,
Slow discerning of worldhood's worth;
Soul, awaking
By night and taking
Roads forsaking enchanted earth:
Man, unguided
And self-divided,
Clocked by silence which tells decay;
You that keep
In a land asleep
One light burning till break of day:
You whose vigil
Is deed and sigil,
Bond and service of lives afar,—
Seek, in seeing

Your own blind being,
Peace, remote in the morning star.

Elected Silence

Where voices vanish into dream,
I have discovered, from the pride
Of temporal trophydoms, this theme,
That silence is the ultimate guide.

Allow me now much musing-space
To shape my secrecies alone:
Allow me life apart, whose heart
Translates instinctive tragi-tone.

How solitude can hear! O see
How stillness unreluctant stands
Enharmonized with cloud and tree...
O earth and heaven not made with hands!

Vigil in Spring

The night air, smelling cold with spring,
And the dark twigs of towering trees,—

When age remembers youth we bring
Aliveness back to us in these.
Leaning from windows on the gloom,
We are one with purpling woods and wet
Wild violets of our earth in whom
Aliveness wakes and wonders yet.

Inbreathed awareness, hushed and cold,
Of growth's annunciate thrust and thrill,
We lean from lifetime, growing old,
And feel your starlit magic still.

December Stillness

December stillness, teach me through your trees
That loom along the west, one with the land,
The veiled evangel of your mysteries.

While nightfall, sad and spacious, on the down
Deepens, and dusk imbues me where I stand,
With grave diminishings of green and brown,
Speak, roofless Nature, your instinctive words;
And let me learn your secret from the sky,
Following a flock of steadfast-journeying birds
In lone remote migration beating by.

December stillness, crossed by twilight roads,
Teach me to travel far and bear my loads.

It was the love of life, when I was young,
Which led me out in summer to explore
The daybreak world. A bird's first notes were sung
For childhood standing at the garden door.
That loneliness it was which made me wise
When I looked out and saw
Dark trees against the strangely brightening skies
And learnt the love of earth that is my law.

The love of life is my religion still.
Steadfast through rigorous nights, companioned only
By what I am and what I strive to be,—
I seek no mystery now beyond the hill
And wait no change but to become more lonely,
No freedom till the sleep that sets me free.

They were not true, those dreams, those story books of
youth;
I left them all at home; went out to find the truth;
Slammed the green garden gate on my young years, and
started
Along the road to search for freedom, empty hearted.

But dreams have secret strength; they will not die so soon:
They haunt the quiet house through idle afternoon;
And under childhood skies their summer thoughts await
The rediscovering soul returning tired and late.

For, having grown world-wise through harshly unlearned
illusion,
The traveller into time arrives at this conclusion,—
That life, encountered and unmasked in variant shapes,

Dissolves in dust and cloud, and thwartingly escapes.

But in remembered eyes of youth my dreams remain.

They were my firstling friends. I have returned again.

Down the glimmering staircase, past the pensive clock,

Childhood creeps on tiptoe, fumbles at the lock

Out of night escaping, toward the arch of dawn,

What can childhood look for, over the wet lawn?

Standing in the strangeness of that garden air,

Ignorant adventure finds world wonder there:

Miles are more than distance when the cocks are crowing

And along the valley night's last goods-train going

Tells of earth untravelled and what lies beyond

Catching roach and gudgeon in the orchard pond.

My past has gone to bed. Upstairs in clockless rooms

My past is fast asleep. But mindsight reillumes

Here in my ruminant head the days where dust lies deep.

Sleep-walkers empty-eyed come strangely down the stairs.

These are my selves,—once proud, once passionate with
young prayers,

Once vehement with vows. I know not when they died,

Those ignorant selves.... Meanwhile my self sits brooding
here

In the house where I was born. Dwindling, they disappear.

Me they did not foresee. But in their looks I find

Simplicities unlearned long since and left behind.

Unwisdom

To see with different eyes
From every day,
And find in dream disguise
Worlds far away—

To walk in childhood's land
With trusting looks,
And oldly understand
Youth's fairy-books—

Thus our unwisdom brings
Release which hears
The bird that sings
In groves beyond the years.

In Sicily

Because we two can never again come back
On life's one forward track,—
Never again first-happily explore
This valley of rocks and vines and orange-trees,
Half Biblical and half Hesperides,
With dark blue seas calling from a shell-strewn shore:
By the strange power of Spring's resistless green,

Let us be true to what we have shared and seen,
And as our amulet this idyll save.
And since the unreturning day must die,
Let it for ever be lit by an evening sky
And the wild myrtle grow upon its grave.

Farewell to Youth

After last week's long journey, spring
Rests in the sunshine of the Square.
Out there the leaves rejoice; they bring
Some secret spell I may not share.

I think, I'm fond of being alone
With music and my past. And then
I see to-morrows grey like stone,
Where virtues walk as weary men.

And while the lenten twilight falls
On silent room and hand-propped head,
Within my heart's mysterious walls
The dreamer that was Youth lies dead.

Long Ago

Birds in the world were waking;
Dawn was beyond the wood;
Youth at an open window
Tranced in the twilight stood;
Youth in springtime strangeness
Stilled in a mind-made past,
Seeing, beyond his limits,
Loveliness veiled and vast.

Youth, once mine, once wonder,
Ignorant, brimmed with tears,
Long have you wandered, laden
Head and heart with your years;
Yet in this moment's vision,
Youth at the window stands,
Unforeboding, enchanted,
Holding the world in his hands.

At the end of all wrong roads I came
To the gates of the garden without a name.
There, till the spell should fail, I found
Sudden Elysium, strange with sound
Of unknown birds and waters wild
With voices unresolved for rest.
There every flower was fancy's child,
And every tree was glory's guest,
And Love, by darkness undefiled,
Went like the sun from east to west.

War Experience

Degrees of groping thought have taught me to conclude
That when a man began in youth to learn truth crude
From life in the demented strife and ghastly glooms
Of soul-conscripting war, mechanic and volcanic,—
Not much remains, twelve winters later, of the hater
Of purgatorial pains. And somewhat softly booms
A Somme bombardment: almost unbelieved-in looms
The day-break sentry staring over Kiel Trench crater.

Ex-Service

Derision from the dead
Mocks armamental madness.
Redeem (each Ruler said)
Mankind. Men died to do it.
And some with glorying gladness
Bore arms for earth and bled:
But most went glumly through it
Dumbly doomed to rue it.

The darkness of their dying
Grows one with War recorded;
Whose swindled ghosts are crying
From shell-holes in the past,
Our deeds with lies were lauded,
Our bones with wrongs rewarded.

Dream voices these—denying
Dud laurels to the last.

Break silence. You have listened overlong
To muttering mind-wrought voices. Call for lights.
Prove these persistent haunting presences wrong
Who mock and stultify your days and nights.

Dawn comes, and recreates the sleepless room;
And eyesight asks what arguing plagues exist.
But in that garret of uneasy gloom
Which is your brain, the presences persist.

The Gains of Good

Word slowly understood;
Thought finding gradual form;
And power applied;
These are the gains of good;
Bold breath and life-blood warm;
Darkness denied.

To carve the stubborn stone;
With sense intense explore,
And inward sight.
Thus make they earth their own,
Whose deeds their dream adore,
Leaving us light.

"We Shall not all Sleep"

Often I've wanted to be half a ghost,
Haunting familiar friends, unheard but hearing:
Silent among their silences. For most
I like such guesthood, freed, unfelt, unfearing.

Unfelt? Who knows? ... If shriven self survives,
Might not a hint be given, a warning uttered
By ghostly vigilance, to troubled lives?
Might not their intuitions be half unshuttered,
And, like a dusty sunbeam on the gloom,
Death send one shaft of radiance to that room?

Unvouched are visions. But sleep-forsaken faith
Can win unworlded miracles and rejoice,
Welcoming, at haggard ends of night,—what wraith—
What angel—what beloved and banished voice?

Vibrations

Chord—very softly sounded—echoing on;
Touched by what hand, who knows—for what rapt ear?—
In this rayed room of memories past and gone

From thought, reanimate now and ghostly near:
Veiled musical vibrations which belong
To these essential walls, these trodden floors,
These windows open to the blackbird's song,
And, shut for the last time on life, these doors.

Caught unaware in day-dream silences,
I hear you, vanished voices, where such peace
Imbues my being as when your gladness breathed;
And now like leafy whispering it is,
And now slow shadows of the towering trees
On lawns that your experience has bequeathed.

Words for the Wordless

Smile on, you newly dead, whose griefless masks
Are emptied of mortality of mind;
Safe is your secret from the world that asks
If death be dark,—all lost and left behind.
Be dust, you ex-inhabitants of air,
You freemen of—at worst—unconscious night;
Be mystery, you whose voices haunt us where
This little while we listen from the light.

Be real, imagined angels, when we stand
Near-thoughted to the cold and cratered land,
Alone with imperfection that must part
From flesh, which for its crowned achievement cried,

And soon must follow those who dreamed and died
Carrying immortal omens in their heart.

Again the dead, the dead again demanding
To be, O now to be remembered strongly—
The dead, reminding mindsight of their darkness—
The dead who overhear us, listening longly.

Musician, now reverberant in our playing;
Poet, the presence haunting urgent words;
Dead youth, in love with life, now June-awakened
To hear through dream the dawn-delighted birds;
How can you be believed in, how made certain,
How sought beyond the silences of learning?
And how, revisitants by life envisioned,
Can what we are empower your quiet returning?

Revisitation

(W. H. R. R.)

What voice revisits me this night? What face
To my heart's room returns?
From that perpetual silence where the grace
Of human sainthood burns
Hastes he once more to harmonize and heal?
I know not. Only I feel

His influence undiminished.
And his life's work, in me and many, unfinished.

O fathering friend and scientist of good,
Who in solitude, one bygone summer's day,
And in throes of bodily anguish, passed away
From dream and conflict and research-lit lands
Of ethnologic learning,—even as you stood
Selfless and ardent, resolute and gay,
So in this hour, in strange survival stands
Your ghost, whom I am powerless to repay.

The Merciful Knight

Swift, in a moment's thought, our lastingness is wrought
From life, the transient wing.
Swift, in a moment's light, he mercy found, that knight
Who rode alone in spring...
The knight who sleeps in stone with ivy overgrown
Knew this miraculous thing.

In a moment of the years the sun, like love through tears,
Shone where the rain went by.
In a world where armoured men made swords their strength
and then
Rode darkly out to die,
One heart was there estranged; one heart, one heart was
changed

While the cloud crossed the sun...
Mercy from long ago, be mine that I may know
Life's lastingness begun.

Memorandum

In multitudes we grope; our blurred events
Were argued by assembled generations.
Time toils in centuries and by continents
While racial memories haunt the souls of nations.
Enormous murmurings from the mind of man
Accumulate as history; and from void
Obliquities of ignorance which began
His growth, blind hordes have laboured and destroyed.

If there should be some Power ensphered in light
Who contemplates his handiwork, supreme
In differentiating wrong from right,—
To him all human consciousness might seem
A Sleeper, powerless in imprisoning night
To waken from a purgatorial dream.

Human Histories

The multitudinous dead, like books unread,
Are somewhere in the library of Time.
Glimpses we get, of what they felt and said,—
Humdrum and homely, or loftily sublime:
But mostly they are ghostly, nameless, nought,
Whose journeying shadows fell and left no trace;
Whose worlds in worlds of woven and welded thought
Are now the language of a vanished race.

Nothing exists in life more strange than these
Lost lineaments of human histories.

Babylon

Babylon that was beautiful is Nothing now.
Once to the world it tolled a golden bell:
Belshazzar wore its blaze upon his brow;
Ruled; and to ruin fell.
Babylon—a blurred and blinded face of stone—
At dumb Oblivion bragged with trumpets blown;
Teemed, and while merchants throve and prophets dreamed,
Bowed before idols, and was overthrown.

Babylon the merciless, now a name of doom,
Built towers in Time, as we to-day, for whom
Auguries of self-annihilation loom.

The Hour-Glass

Myself I see, holding an hour-glass in his hand,
Deriving intimate omens from the trickling sand:
Intent on Time's device which casually contains
The world's enigma in its quietly falling grains.
Myself I see; for whom the idle moments pass
From *is* to *was* in that *memento mori* glass;
For whom the divination darkly seems to say,

"I am the emblem of your phantom yesterday.
I am to-morrow's journey and the eternal track
Across the desert land of life where none turn back.
I am the setting sun, the sun that rises red;
And the white moon, silvering dim cities of the dead."

Everyman

The weariness of life that has no will
To climb the steepening hill:
The sickness of the soul for sleep, and to be still.
And then once more the impassioned pigmy fist
Clenched cloudward and defiant;
The pride that would prevail, the doomed protagonist
Grappling the ghostly giant.
Victim and venturer turn by turn, and then,

Set free to be again
Companion in repose with those who once were men.

The mind of man environing its thought,
Wherein a world within this world is wrought,—
 A shadowed face alone in fields of light.
The lowly growth and long endeavour of will
That waits and watches from its human hill
 A landmark tree looming against the night.

World undiscovered within us, radiant-white,
Through miracles of sight unmastered still,
Grant us the power to follow and to fulfil.

Heaven

Heaven, through the storm-rent skies of Time revealing
Visions, designed by man's death-fearing mind
To hallow his carnal heritage with healing.

Heaven, the last word upon their lips for whom
No morning-star shall burn, beyond that whisper
Going to look for angels in the gloom.

Heaven, the reward of racked renunciation,
When from the body's broken wayside shrine
The spirit in its ultimate aspiration
Shares the world-sacrifice and dies divine.

Credo

The heaven for which I wait has neither guard nor gate.
The God in whom I trust shall raise me not from dust.
I shall not see that heaven for which my days have striven,
Nor kneel before the God toward whom my feet have trod.

But when from this half-human evolvment man and woman
Emerge, through brutish Me made strong and fair and free,
The dumb forgotten dead will be the ground they tread,
And in their eyes will shine my deathless hope divine.

Ultimatum

Something we cannot see, something we may not reach,
Something beyond clairvoyant vision of the years
Our senses, winged with spirit, wordlessly beseech.

Meanwhile rife rumourings of the earth are in our ears,—
The lonely beat of blood, the immanence of ghosts,
And foam's oblivion whitening under crumbling coasts.

Presences Perfected

I looked on that prophetic land
Where, manifested by their powers,
Presences perfected stand
Whom night and day no more command
With shine and shadow of earthly hours.

I saw them. Numberless they stood
Half-way toward heaven, that men might mark
The grandeur of their ghostlihood
Burning divinely on the dark.

Names had they none. Through spirit alone
They triumphed, the makers of mankind,
Whose robes like flames were round them blown
By winds which raved from the unknown
Erebus of earth's ancestral mind.

Ode

Man, frustrated and sleep-forsaken,
Gloom-regarding from inward sight,
Sees the city of God unshaken
Steeply stand in unworlded white;
Sees, adrift from his faith-lost learning,

Sun-remote from terrestrial thought,
Power, envisioned by earth's discerning,
Peace, by mortal aspiring wrought.

How dares he in a dream's deceiving
Link that vision with love unknown,—
Out of the dark in his blind believing
Claiming the city of God for his own?
How, alone with his human story,
Mazed by myths of the gods of men,
Dares he guess in that glimpse of glory
Truth revealed from beyond his ken?

Sense-confined in his brain existence,
Not for him to deny his doom;
Not through dreams does the soul outdistance
Death who knocks at the listening room.
Not from time shall he look on heaven;
Not through hope shall his faults be healed...
City of God, to redeemed forgiven
Radiant life, be on earth revealed.

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[The end of *Vigils* by Siegfried Sassoon]