

SOME POEMS BY J. ROSS MACDONALD

Hidden Places

(after Columbine)

There are hidden places all apart
Where deer and rabbits are,
And mountain meadows green,
And sunny sand beside the stream,
But wolf and bear are never far.

There are hidden places in the heart
Where love and kindness are,
And justice is not mean,
And greater heights within the dream,
But hate and fear are never far.

J. Ross Macdonald

The Wheel

At seaside, the earth grows old
as still it must
Where stone and shell are ground
to sand and then to dust.
Life is a beach:
The grinding wheel
Where blood and bone
Wear down and reach
their final round.

Death waits for all who feel —
The stone that sings,
the shell that curves
Know naught of lust
And changing, cannot die.
For us, the blood goes cold
and bones must rust,
A time
when wants grow few
And wanting itself
leaves bone and blood
To earth and dust and rest.
Or do I lie?

Time's Gifts

Life is too short for these:

You.

Butterflies and

The green buds of spring,

Speckled gannet's eggs,

Spider webs,

The ten thousand things —

Life is too short for these.

Life is too short for these:

Mozart.

Wrinkled faces in the sun,

Water drops on leaves after

a summer's rain,

Bacon smells, and the taste

of peaches.

Love.

Life is too short for these.

Reality

The clouds are insubstantial
As dreams, you say,
But clouds are made of water
And dreams are currents
In the brain.

Dreams aren't real, you say.
Then take my pain.

King and Clown

The sun shines down
On king and clown,
And cares not which
Doth wear the crown.

And cares not who
Is in the ditch.
This is quite true,
So why the frown?

Winter's Time

I

Fall, white snow,
You are not as cold as my heart
When love has gone.

Fall on the earth, cover it over,
Leave no part
Untouched.
Hide it from sight, layer by layer,
As my heart is inlaid,
By increments of pain.

Fall, snow. Cover the earth
Cover my heart.
Fall again.

II

I, who was young,
Am now old.
Such a little time with you,
A bloom of days
That sparkle in memory
After the quieting frost.

Now that you are gone
With no return,
I must soon follow after
With winter's kingdom come
To my frozen heart.

Separatus non est disputandum
(After T. S. Eliot)

What have I thought of our separation?
Say felt — thinking is dangerous in the dusk.
Remembrance is better
In this uncertain obscurity, this fragile silence.

Separation breeds images in the mind;
Images of imagined reality —
But surely no less real.

Remembrance of what might have been
Is not less valid
Than remembrance of what has been:
All things exist
Somewhere, sometime.

My thoughts of you
More real, more true —
Imagination coalesced
With memory —
A trove dredged up
From hidden sea floors.

Absence breeds pictures
Closer to desire,
Changing, day by day,
My awareness of your truth.

So can thought add to the reality
Of remembrance.
Or, perhaps, it may divide

My knowledge into a thousand
Sparkling pieces,
Which so diffuse the light of truth
That you are lost in lovely multiplicity.

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Futility

A fly preens itself upon the wall;
A man lies flattened on the ground.
Both believe themselves the all in all.
A fly preens itself upon the wall.

The fly is not afraid to fall
The man trembles at the cannon's sound.
A fly preens itself upon the wall.
A man lies flattened on the ground.

Doors

I like doors that hang evenly on their hinges,
As apt for opening as for closing,
Desiring one no more than the other.

There is a time for contemplation,
World shut out,
And a time for action,
World let in.

Process and permanence:
Truth behind the closed door;
Truth outside the open.
What matters which?
I like doors which swing evenly on their hinges.

Solitude

Solitude distills truth slowly,
As moss enfolding stone.
And laughter, passing with the wind,
Is more true because it holds
An element of pain.

Life

When out creeps slowly grim despair
From depths immeasurable to man,
Then stop, think, take heed,
'Tis but another dream within a dream,
And so has been since time began.

To those who will to best the lion in its lair
I speak.
Oh cautious ones, and passive too,
In life all you ever need is a gentle sleep —
And the lotus leaf.
I am not concerned with you.
Like vegetables you slowly grow — then go.
All others, this alone should know:
Motion is the center — all is fair
If you but find that I am there.

My message done, now I go.
Yet seek me in the hills;
I will be there.
Seek me in the sunset;
I shall greet you.
Gaze in the cool depths of water;
I gaze back.
Seek me not inside.
Mirror never was, itself could see.

My desire: An Archaic Melody

Whence come thou, O sweet flower of my oblivion,
Save from the soft night we in the beginning leave
And at the end find anew?

Infinite circle of my delight,
A music of flames, a compound of fire
Has ringed me around, bounded my heart.
With what subtle filaments you weave
The cloth of love, the work of art.

Night's imaginings enfold me,
Cover my head, steal my sight.
Your soft curve followed to an infinite horizon
Has blinded my eyes, broken the lyre —
Black pools of midnight know my desire.

Passion's end

The minor dithyrambs beat through my brain
A sluggish moon, half at wane
Appears, and soon, too soon, there will be
Some dancing lights far away upon the sea.

The predilections of the pornographers
Hem me in — There is no god save Moloch.
The maw of the forest beckons.
Why not? — You will not come.

The light from off the sea is fierce
Dripping on my head like silver blood,
Yet not blood for it is cold.
Cold — like the tears of my mind.

Oh forest, where are you? Oh sea, how deep?
Soon the dithyrambs shall die —
Night and the moon now sleep,
Escaping my questing and the question — why?

Ever through me sounds the call:
Half hidden, out of sight.
Now felt, now heard.
Impelling, urging, entreating.
The goal of desire is here.
As people to the church,
I go — ubiquitous glory of joy.

Questions

Where would we be
Without a chinquapin tree?
Where would we be
Without the wide open sea?

Where would we be
Without a dear mother?
Where would we be
Without each other?

Without you and me,
Where would we be,
Where would we be?

Ross Macdonald, 6/99

On making free verse (in the dog days)

First, write a little essay
On a subject of your choosing,
And decide if it's going to be
Sad or just amusing.

Since any subject will do, why not:
"What my dog did today."
If you want it to be sublime,
Don't make it rhyme;
That takes much too much time,
And omit any assonance
(You certainly mustn't talk so dirty!)

Don't worry about structure:
Just capitalize each new line,
And certainly don't make it scan
Or it will be an also-ran.
All this will make it really really fine.

But just what did my dog do today?
(Happy:) My dog licked me once and played all day
(Sad:) My dog licked me twice and passed away.
That's what my dog did today.

Republican Anthem

or

Schiavo Lament

What's right? What's wrong?

Here's a song that seems too long.

Without delay, let's try to be strong.

Where has the money gone?

Can we ever atone?

Just throw us a stone.

What's wrong is right. What's right is wrong.

JRM 2005.

There is no nobility

There is no nobility

Save that of spirit.

There is no mobility

Save that of mind.

For each, no infinity

Does nature permit.

Life can be unkind,

So prize the fruit and spew the rind.

Ross Macdonald, 6/27/05

