

**Naxos 8.570201**  
**The English Song Series • 17 – William Alwyn (1905-1985)**

**Mirages**

*Words by William Alwyn*

[01] **Undine**

She comes to me  
at night  
when the rain drums on my window  
and the wind whimpers in the eaves  
and the candle flickers  
and the wick gutters  
and shadows mope in my room  
and I am alone.

Suddenly  
she is there at the window  
naked in the rain  
pale in the veil of the rain  
her face the tears of the raindrops  
her breasts water-lily cups  
with stamens of crimson  
her hair spun-gold  
streaming on her shoulders  
in a torrent of fire  
and her eyes are the eyes of wonder  
desire matching desire.

She smiles  
she beckons to me ...  
then suddenly  
she is gone.

'Undine, are you there?  
You cannot leave me desolate.  
Undine, were you here?  
You cannot abandon me.'

Borne on the wind I hear her song.

And her song is the song  
of the song I will write  
of the poem I will write  
of the music I will write  
of all I will write  
till wonder is no more  
and desire is no more  
till time and her song  
have gone for ever  
and I am no more.

[02] **Aquarium**

Behind a sheet of glass  
slim shadows flit and glide  
a shoal of birds dips to the grass  
trees black as reeds  
lean on the wavering green  
a hawk hangs motionless  
and sudden dives  
leaving the sky  
blank as a question mark.

Within my twilight room  
[I sit and stare]  
all is silent  
no sound disturbs the landscape  
nature is dumb  
and I am mute as a fish  
in a goldfish bowl.

[03] **Honeysuckle**

She clings to me  
lovingly entwined  
as the honeysuckle  
her soft cheek next to mine  
breast to breast  
and leg and thigh so joined  
I know not which is she  
and which is I.

She sleeps  
(fragrant and sweet  
as the honeysuckle)  
I dream awake  
but utterly content.

She stirs  
(A breath of wind  
in the honeysuckle)  
she murmurs in her sleep  
(the hum of bees  
in the honeysuckle)  
'Oh, do not leave me  
do not ever leave me'  
and sighs  
and sleeps again.

My dearest love how can I leave you?  
How can the fused sepals  
of the honeysuckle part?  
How can twin tendrils  
of the same vine  
exist apart?

[04] **Metronome**

Measured against the dumb remorseless beat of time  
Death's rigid metronome goading our footsteps to the  
grave  
measured against the pale derisive moon  
tugged by the tide's eternal lave  
measured against the circling sun  
the planets' slow pavane  
measured against the starry sky  
galaxy repeating galaxy  
measured against all these  
I am ephemeral a nullity  
a mote in measureless eternity  
trapped in a fleeting beam.

Am I then nothing?  
When I am gone will time still beat  
or will the metronome run down  
and the world's pulse stand silent as my soundless  
heart?  
Unthinkable that I should die  
and let the world live on.

[05] **Paradise**

Beat Wings beat  
against the blank impasse  
of death  
beyond is Paradise  
fields of undreamt green  
and flowers jewelled and crystalline  
shining like stars  
beat beat against the glass.

Beat Wings beat  
death is no salvation  
flowers fields and stars  
Are but imagination  
consolatory lies  
Fool's Paradise.

[06] **Portrait in a Mirror**

Surely that is not I  
lips drawn back from dog-eared teeth  
in a simian grin  
brushwood eyebrows  
squat nose and bristled chin  
hair in the gaping nostrils  
protruding from crinkled cars  
and all the blotchy face  
bearing the impress of a fine wire mesh  
wrinkled  
neanderthal.

How often had I looked  
but never saw till now  
looked while the razor  
scraped away the snow  
leaving my visage bare  
devoid of all pretence  
Yes I had looked but never saw till now.

The face peers back at me  
so old - so very old -  
with eyes  
innocent as a child.

© *William Alwyn*

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**Nocturnes**

*Poems by Michael Armstrong*

[07] **Everything is Now**

Your fingers curl thro' mine,  
I feel their flesh  
but only guess their bones.  
The blue lines on your wrist  
branch out along your hand  
but I can only guess  
the redness of their blue.

Our worlds are joined  
by our ten fingers,  
we clasp them tight,  
forget that earth  
will claim them separately.

The seconds pulse away  
but hand in hand  
we only know  
that everything is now.

[08] **Summer Rain**

What will you say  
when the stones blossom at last  
their shells breaking to expose  
their saffron petals to the sun?

The rain has always driven  
a wedge of fear between us  
It washes away the years  
that have happened since we met.

Once you must have wept  
when I was not about the cause.  
This rain could be your tears  
watering the buds of stones.

[09] **Visitation**

Up the green stairs  
come the silent footsteps,  
as I wait without fear  
apprehending a mystery.

The mirror shows my face  
suspended in a room  
There's no passing of time  
– no beginning nor end.

But when the knock comes  
I will not turn around  
to watch the door swing open  
heralding an approach.

Instead I'll stare ahead  
deep into the mirror  
and watch its reflections  
drain slowly from the glass.

[10] **Summer Night**

The scent of honeysuckle drives us mad,  
its pink and yellow fingers milk the moon,  
mouths like open clams exhale moist air,  
as clouds of tiny needles prick the night.

Electric wings vibrate a metal thread,  
antennae brush our flesh like wisps of hair,  
the giant moth uncoils its tongue to feed,  
its furry body shuddering on the flower.

[11] **Circle**

That man dying  
has my pain.  
That man dead  
is alive again.

Within his love  
my hate began.  
My hate was love  
for every man.

My future  
echoes in his past.  
My death came first.  
His birth was last.

His virtues grew  
from out my sin.  
We both will end  
when we begin.

[12] **Response**

The hem of the sea turns white,  
flaps on a sandy thigh  
rinses the head of each rock,  
unravels among the stones.

The fold of its emerald robe  
hides the immaculate goddess  
who deep in her bed of slime  
only responds to the moon.

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[13] **Slum Song**

*Words by Louis MacNeice*

O the slums of Dublin fermenting with children  
*Wander far and near*  
The growing years are a cruel squadron  
And poverty is a rusty cauldron  
*Wander near and far.*

The youths play cards by the broken fanlight  
*Wander far and near*  
The jack looks greasy in the sunlight  
As hands will fumble in the moonlight  
*Wander near and far.*

And the grown man must play the horses  
*Wander far and near*  
Some do better on different courses  
But the blacks will remain to draw the hearses.  
*Wander near and far.*

The bowsey in his second childhood  
*Wander far and near*  
Thumbs a pipe of peace and briarwood  
But lacks a light to re-light his manhood,  
*Wander near and far.*

Near and far, far and near,  
The street lamp winks, the mutes are here.  
Above the steeple hangs a star  
So near and far... far.

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**Seascapes**

*Poems by Michael Armstrong*

[14] **Dawn at Sea**

The breeze is scented with canvas  
horizons are waiting for masts  
Green eyes blinded like pearls  
stare from the wake of the ship  
The palace invaded by waves  
is ivory burnished with salt  
and daylight torn from the sky  
glows through the white corridors.

[15] **Sea-Mist**

The negro ghosts are dancing  
wrapped in their white shawls.

The bell beyond the harbour  
calls to unseen waves.

Somewhere the wingless birds  
are waiting for the wind.

[16] **Song of the Drowned Man**

Sea song  
of the breathless cave  
Beyond the surf  
a tongueless bell.

Sea song  
from the burnished wave  
before the curve  
a glaucous swell.

Sea song  
from the beaten cove  
Beneath the foam  
a hollow shell.

[17] **Black Gulls**

Bird in the sky, white gull,  
black against the blue  
sliding across my eyes  
that water from the glare.

A messenger perhaps?  
Borne on outstretched wings  
soon to melt away  
and leave the heavens bare.

Today the placid sea  
flows down from the sky,  
water combines with air  
to make a violet haze.

A frill of bubbled lace  
flutters along the shore  
and wet sand to the south  
bursts into a blaze.

Then another gull  
black as the one before  
appearing from behind  
to hold my troubled gaze.

Resting in the wings  
it drifts away from land.  
A speck above the sea  
it dies in a violet haze.

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**Invocations**

*Poems by Michael Armstrong*

[18] **Through the Centuries**

Through the centuries I have held your hand  
whispered your name as the wind in the trees  
Nothing remembered and nothing forgotten  
each time it is different, each time the same.

Our meetings renewed a secret joy  
our farewells destroyed what we understood.  
Today was a greeting, tomorrow a parting  
our sin was a brilliance that died in our evening.

What did we learn and what did we know?  
What became usual and what became strange?  
Our coming together made thoughts that were  
growing,  
our drifting apart an end to their thinking.

[19] **Holding the Night**

Holding the night in the palm of my hand.  
Feeling its blackness as the wind  
streams to the edge of the gulf  
to fall through unknown trees.

This moment has always been ours  
when the tips of our fingers touch  
enclosing the gift of the hidden moon  
floating, floating floating beyond the clouds.

[20] **Separation**

Out in the dark night  
the birds are asleep  
and you too are sleeping  
out of my reach  
held only in my thoughts.

Of all things in the world  
I love you most, I love you most  
but I cannot get near you  
and you remain unknown.

My love is waiting here for you  
to pick up and wear  
like a warm garment.

At least enclose yourself  
within its folds,  
if only, if only, if only to keep out the cold.

[21] **Drought**

These are the days of waiting  
when to touch a stone is an act of faith  
and your blurred outline hangs in space  
the loved familiar out of focus.

Where is the longed for grasp,  
the sound of soothing intonations,  
the sacrament of known flesh?  
The hound has lost its scent.

No baying at this summer moon...  
hanging bloated over parched grass  
not even cold regrets  
for the rain's green turmoil.

I try to decypher signs  
to read the ripples on a dying pool  
to reach fragments of graffiti  
tossed haphazard in a dusty spiral.

Hope is a dry seed hidden  
under crisp leaves in the gutter  
One shoot in a shrivelled plant.  
is the only promise we share.

[22] **Spring Rain**

The annual miracle of green unfolds  
and each leaf holds its bead of rain  
then lets it fall only to be renewed again

The polished poplars shimmer and vibrate granting  
the sky a soft percussive voice  
that falls in grey green syllables down to earth.

And through the rain you come like a green ghost  
to take my hand and whisper in my ear  
of love and passing time and endlessness.

[23] **Invocation to the Queen of Moonlight**

Climb through the spiral of summer  
dispensing cool essence of light

Break through the lattice of leaves  
sprinkling the grass with your diamonds.

Fill the pale air with your perfume  
scenting the dreams of your sleepers

join interlacing of lovers  
to the half-heard rhythm of waves.

Drift on the breast of the sea  
encrust the dim landscape with marble.  
Drift on the breast of the sea.

[24] **Our Magic Horse**

Where we can find our magic horse  
to take us our journey among the stars,  
rediscover our pointless toy  
that only fools would attempt to ride?

Fools like us who could travel far  
beyond the mirror of our world  
to reach the valley of fruit and flower  
warmed by Eden's changeless sun.

You and I could live your dream  
walk hand in hand in golden corn  
not wishing to speak, not wishing to take  
but only to merge in a timeless dawn.

Let us always try to be upside down  
to see the wonder of pointless things  
to ride together our magic horse  
and know the truth of its hidden wings.