

# **Last Poems**

William Butler Yeats

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# Last Poems

William Butler Yeats

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## Under Ben Bulben

I

SWEAR by what the sages spoke  
Round the Mareotic Lake  
That the Witch of Atlas knew,  
Spoke and set the cocks a-crow.

Swear by those horsemen, by those women  
Complexion and form prove superhuman,  
That pale, long-visaged company  
That air in immortality  
Completeness of their passions won;  
Now they ride the wintry dawn  
Where Ben Bulben sets the scene.

Here's the gist of what they mean.

II

Many times man lives and dies  
Between his two eternities,  
That of race and that of soul,  
And ancient Ireland knew it all.  
Whether man die in his bed  
Or the rifle knocks him dead,  
A brief parting from those dear  
Is the worst man has to fear.  
Though grave-diggers' toil is long,

## Last Poems

Sharp their spades, their muscles strong.  
They but thrust their buried men  
Back in the human mind again.

### III

You that Mitchel's prayer have heard,  
"Send war in our time, O Lord!"  
Know that when all words are said  
And a man is fighting mad,  
Something drops from eyes long blind,  
He completes his partial mind,  
For an instant stands at ease,  
Laughs aloud, his heart at peace.  
Even the wisest man grows tense  
With some sort of violence  
Before he can accomplish fate,  
Know his work or choose his mate.

### IV

Poet and sculptor, do the work,  
Nor let the modish painter shirk  
What his great forefathers did.  
Bring the soul of man to God,  
Make him fill the cradles right.

Measurement began our might:  
Forms a stark Egyptian thought,  
Forms that gentler phidias wrought.  
Michael Angelo left a proof  
On the Sistine Chapel roof,  
Where but half-awakened Adam  
Can disturb globe-trotting Madam  
Till her bowels are in heat,  
proof that there's a purpose set  
Before the secret working mind:  
Profane perfection of mankind.

Quattrocento put in paint  
On backgrounds for a God or Saint  
Gardens where a soul's at ease;  
Where everything that meets the eye,  
Flowers and grass and cloudless sky,  
Resemble forms that are or seem  
When sleepers wake and yet still dream.  
And when it's vanished still declare,  
With only bed and bedstead there,  
That heavens had opened.  
Gyres run on;  
When that greater dream had gone  
Calvert and Wilson, Blake and Claude,  
Prepared a rest for the people of God,

## Last Poems

Palmer's phrase, but after that  
Confusion fell upon our thought.

V

Irish poets, earn your trade,  
Sing whatever is well made,  
Scorn the sort now growing up  
All out of shape from toe to top,  
Their unremembering hearts and heads  
Base-born products of base beds.  
Sing the peasantry, and then  
Hard-riding country gentlemen,  
The holiness of monks, and after  
Porter-drinkers' randy laughter;  
Sing the lords and ladies gay  
That were beaten into the clay  
Through seven heroic centuries;  
Cast your mind on other days  
That we in coming days may be  
Still the indomitable Irishry.

VI

Under bare Ben Bulben's head  
In Drumcliff churchyard Yeats is laid.  
An ancestor was rector there  
Long years ago, a church stands near,  
By the road an ancient cross.

No marble, no conventional phrase;  
On limestone quarried near the spot  
By his command these words are cut:  
Cast a cold eye  
On life, on death.  
Horseman, pass by!

## Three Songs To The One Burden

THE Roaring Tinker if you like,  
But Mannion is my name,  
And I beat up the common sort  
And think it is no shame.  
The common breeds the common,  
A lout begets a lout,

## Last Poems

So when I take on half a score  
I knock their heads about.  
From mountain to mountain ride the fierce horsemen.  
All Mannions come from Manannan,  
Though rich on every shore  
He never lay behind four walls  
He had such character,  
Nor ever made an iron red  
Nor soldered pot or pan;  
His roaring and his ranting  
Best please a wandering man.  
From mountain to mountain ride the fierce horsemen.  
Could Crazy Jane put off old age  
And ranting time renew,  
Could that old god rise up again  
We'd drink a can or two,  
And out and lay our leadership  
On country and on town,  
Throw likely couples into bed  
And knock the others down.  
From mountain to mountain ride the fierce horsemen.

### II

My name is Henry Middleton,  
I have a small demesne,  
A small forgotten house that's set  
On a storm-bitten green.  
I scrub its floors and make my bed,  
I cook and change my plate,  
The post and garden-boy alone  
Have keys to my old gate.  
From mountain to mountain ride the fierce horsemen.  
Though I have locked my gate on them,  
I pity all the young,  
I know what devil's trade they learn  
From those they live among,  
Their drink, their pitch-and-toss by day,  
Their robbery by night;  
The wisdom of the people's gone,  
How can the young go straight?  
From mountain to mountain ride the fierce horsemen.  
When every Sunday afternoon  
On the Green Lands I walk  
And wear a coat in fashion.  
Memories of the talk  
Of henwives and of queer old men  
Brace me and make me strong;  
There's not a pilot on the perch  
Knows I have lived so long.  
From mountain to mountain ride the fierce horsemen.

III

Come gather round me, players all:  
Come praise Nineteen–Sixteen,  
Those from the pit and gallery  
Or from the painted scene  
That fought in the Post Office  
Or round the City Hall,  
praise every man that came again,  
Praise every man that fell.  
From mountain to mountain ride the fierce horsemen.  
Who was the first man shot that day?  
The player Connolly,  
Close to the City Hall he died;  
Catriage and voice had he;  
He lacked those years that go with skill,  
But later might have been  
A famous, a brilliant figure  
Before the painted scene.  
From mountain to mountain ride the fierce horsemen.  
Some had no thought of victory  
But had gone out to die  
That Ireland's mind be greater,  
Her heart mount up on high;  
And yet who knows what's yet to come?  
For patrick pearse had said  
That in every generation  
Must Ireland's blood be shed.  
From mountain to mountain ride the fierce horsemen.

## The Black Tower

SAY that the men of the old black tower,  
Though they but feed as the goatherd feeds,  
Their money spent, their wine gone sour,  
Lack nothing that a soldier needs,  
That all are oath–bound men:  
Those banners come not in.

There in the tomb stand the dead upright,  
But winds come up from the shore:  
They shake when the winds roar,  
Old bones upon the mountain shake.

Those banners come to bribe or threaten,  
Or whisper that a man's a fool  
Who, when his own right king's forgotten,  
Cares what king sets up his rule.  
If he died long ago  
Why do you dread us so?

There in the tomb drops the faint moonlight,  
But wind comes up from the shore:  
They shake when the winds roar,  
Old bones upon the mountain shake.

The tower's old cook that must climb and clamber  
Catching small birds in the dew of the morn  
When we hale men lie stretched in slumber  
Swears that he hears the king's great horn.  
But he's a lying hound:  
Stand we on guard oath-bound!

There in the tomb the dark grows blacker,  
But wind comes up from the shore:  
They shake when the winds roar,  
Old bones upon the mountain shake.

## **Cuchulain Comforted**

A MAN that had six mortal wounds, a man  
Violent and famous, strode among the dead;  
Eyes stared out of the branches and were gone.

Then certain Shrouds that muttered head to head  
Came and were gone. He leant upon a tree  
As though to meditate on wounds and blood.

A Shroud that seemed to have authority  
Among those bird-like things came, and let fall  
A bundle of linen. Shrouds by two and three

Came creeping up because the man was still.  
And thereupon that linen-carrier said:



"Your life can grow much sweeter if you will

"Obey our ancient rule and make a shroud;  
Mainly because of what we only know  
The rattle of those arms makes us afraid.

"We thread the needles' eyes, and all we do  
All must together do.' That done, the man  
Took up the nearest and began to sew.

"Now must we sing and sing the best we can,  
But first you must be told our character:  
Convicted cowards all, by kindred slain

"Or driven from home and left to die in fear.'  
They sang, but had nor human tunes nor words,  
Though all was done in common as before;

They had changed their throats and had the throats of  
birds.

## Three Marching Songs

I

REMEMBER all those renowned generations,  
They left their bodies to fatten the wolves,  
They left their homesteads to fatten the foxes,  
Fled to far countries, or sheltered themselves  
In cavern, crevice, or hole,  
Defending Ireland's soul.

Be still, be still, what can be said?  
My father sang that song,  
But time amends old wrong,  
All that is finished, let it fade.

Remember all those renowned generations,  
Remember all that have sunk in their blood,  
Remember all that have died on the scaffold,  
Remember all that have fled, that have stood,  
Stood, took death like a tune  
On an old, tambourine.

## Last Poems

Be still, be still, what can be said?  
My father sang that song,  
But time amends old wrong,  
And all that's finished, let it fade.

Fail, and that history turns into rubbish,  
All that great past to a trouble of fools;  
Those that come after shall mock at O'Donnell,  
Mock at the memory of both O'Neills,  
Mock Emmet, mock Parnell,  
All the renown that fell.

Be still, be still, what can be said?  
My father sang that song,  
but time amends old wrong,  
And all that's finished, let it fade.

### II

The soldier takes pride in saluting his Captain,  
The devotee proffers a knee to his Lord,  
Some back a mare thrown from a thoroughbred,,  
Troy backed its Helen; Troy died and adored;  
Great nations blossom above;  
A slave bows down to a slave.

What marches through the mountain pass?  
No, no, my son, not yet;  
That is an airy spot,  
And no man knows what treads the grass.

We know what rascal might has defiled,  
The lofty innocence that it has slain,  
Were we not born in the peasant's cot  
Where men forgive if the belly gain?  
More dread the life that we live,  
How can the mind forgive?

What marches down the mountain pass?  
No, no, my son, not yet;  
That is an airy spot,  
And no man knows what treads the grass.

What if there's nothing up there at the top?  
Where are the captains that govern mankind?  
What tears down a tree that has nothing within it?  
A blast of the wind, O a marching wind,  
March wind, and any old tune.  
March, march, and how does it run?

What marches down the mountain pass?

## Last Poems

No, no, my son, not yet;  
That is an airy spot,  
And no man knows what treads the grass.

### III

Grandfather sang it under the gallows:  
"Hear, gentlemen, ladies, and all mankind:  
Money is good and a girl might be better,  
But good strong blows are delights to the mind.'  
There, standing on the cart,  
He sang it from his heart.

Robbers had taken his old tambourine,  
But he took down the moon  
And rattled out a tunc;  
Robbers had taken his old tambourinc.

"A girl I had, but she followed another,  
Money I had, and it went in the night,  
Strong drink I had, and it brought me to sorrow,  
But a good strong cause and blows are delight.'  
All there caught up the tune:  
"Oh, on, my darling man.'

Robbers had taken his old tambourine,  
But he took down the moon  
And rattled out a tune;  
Robbers had taken his old tambourine.

"Money is good and a girl might be better,  
No matter what happens and who takes the fall,  
But a good strong cause' – the rope gave a jerk there,  
No more sang he, for his throat was too small;  
But he kicked before he died,  
He did it out of pride.

Robbers had taken his old tambourine,  
But he took down the moon  
And rattled out a tune;  
Robbers had taken his old tambourine.

## In Tara's Halls

A MAN I praise that once in Tara's Hals  
Said to the woman on his knees, "Lie still.  
My hundredth year is at an end. I think  
That something is about to happen, I think  
That the adventure of old age begins.  
To many women I have said, "'Lie still,"  
And given everything a woman needs,  
A roof, good clothes, passion, love perhaps,  
But never asked for love; should I ask that,  
I shall be old indeed.'

Thereon the man  
Went to the Sacred House and stood between  
The golden plough and harrow and spoke aloud  
That all attendants and the casual crowd might hear.  
"God I have loved, but should I ask return  
Of God or woman, the time were come to die.'  
He bade, his hundred and first year at end,  
Diggers and carpenters make grave and coffin;  
Saw that the grave was deep, the coffin sound,  
Summoned the generations of his house,  
Lay in the coffin, stopped his breath and died.

## The Statues

PYTHAGORAS planned it. Why did the people stare?  
His numbers, though they moved or seemed to move  
In marble or in bronze, lacked character.  
But boys and girls, pale from the imagined love  
Of solitary beds, knew what they were,  
That passion could bring character enough,  
And pressed at midnight in some public place  
Live lips upon a plummet-measured face.

No! Greater than Pythagoras, for the men  
That with a mallet or a chisel" modelled these  
Calculations that look but casual flesh, put down  
All Asiatic vague immensities,  
And not the banks of oars that swam upon  
The many-headed foam at Salamis.  
Europe put off that foam when Phidias  
Gave women dreams and dreams their looking-glass.

One image crossed the many-headed, sat  
Under the tropic shade, grew round and slow,  
No Hamlet thin from eating flies, a fat  
Dreamer of the Middle Ages. Empty eyeballs knew  
That knowledge increases unreality, that  
Mirror on mirror mirrored is all the show.  
When gong and conch declare the hour to bless  
Grimalkin crawls to Buddha's emptiness.

When Pearse summoned Cuchulain to his side.  
What stalked through the post Office? What intellect,  
What calculation, number, measurement, replied?  
We Irish, born into that ancient sect  
But thrown upon this filthy modern tide  
And by its formless spawning fury wrecked,  
Climb to our proper dark, that we may trace  
The lineaments of a plummet-measured face.

## News For the Delphic Oracle

I

THERE all the golden codgers lay,  
There the silver dew,  
And the great water sighed for love,  
And the wind sighed too.  
Man-picker Niamh leant and sighed  
By Oisín on the grass;  
There sighed amid his choir of love  
Tall pythagoras.  
plotinus came and looked about,  
The salt-flakes on his breast,  
And having stretched and yawned awhile  
Lay sighing like the rest.

II

Straddling each a dolphin's back  
And steadied by a fin,  
Those Innocents re-live their death,  
Their wounds open again.  
The ecstatic waters laugh because  
Their cries are sweet and strange,  
Through their ancestral patterns dance,  
And the brute dolphins plunge  
Until, in some cliff-sheltered bay  
Where wades the choir of love  
Proffering its sacred laurel crowns,  
They pitch their burdens off.

III

Slim adolescence that a nymph has stripped,  
Peleus on Thetis stares.  
Her limbs are delicate as an eyelid,  
Love has blinded him with tears;  
But Thetis' belly listens.  
Down the mountain walls  
From where pan's cavern is  
Intolerable music falls.  
Foul goat-head, brutal arm appear,  
Belly, shoulder, bum,  
Flash fishlike; nymphs and satyrs  
Copulate in the foam.