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NETS TO CATCH THE WIND

By ELINOR WYLIE

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BEAUTY

Say not of Beauty she is good,  
Or aught but beautiful,  
Or sleek to doves' wings of the wood  
Her wild wings of a gull.

Call her not wicked; that word's touch  
Consumes her like a curse;  
But love her not too much, too much,  
For that is even worse.

O, she is neither good nor bad,  
But innocent and wild!  
Enshrine her and she dies, who had  
The hard heart of a child.

THE EAGLE AND THE MOLE

Avoid the reeking herd,  
Shun the polluted flock,  
Live like that stoic bird,  
The eagle of the rock.

The huddled warmth of crowds  
Begets and fosters hate;  
He keeps, above the clouds,  
His cliff inviolate.

When flocks are folded warm,  
And herds to shelter run,  
He sails above the storm,  
He stares into the sun.

If in the eagle's track  
Your sinews cannot leap,  
Avoid the lathered pack,  
Turn from the steaming sheep.

If you would keep your soul  
From spotted sight or sound,  
Live like the velvet mole;  
Go burrow underground.

And there hold intercourse  
With roots of trees and stones,  
With rivers at their source,  
And disembodied bones.

#### MADMAN'S SONG

Better to see your cheek grown hollow,  
Better to see your temple worn,  
Than to forget to follow, follow,  
After the sound of a silver horn.

Better to bind your brow with willow  
And follow, follow until you die,  
Than to sleep with your head on a golden pillow,  
Nor lift it up when the hunt goes by.

Better to see your cheek grown sallow  
And your hair grown gray, so soon, so soon,  
Than to forget to hallo, hallo,  
After the milk-white hounds of the moon.

## THE PRINKIN' LEDDIE

\_"The Hielan' lassies are a' for spinnin'  
The Lowlan' lassies for prinkin' and pinnin';  
My daddie w'u'd chide me, an' so w'u'd my minnie  
If I s'u'd bring hame sic a prinkin' leddie." \_

Now haud your tongue, ye haverin' coward,  
For whilst I'm young I'll go flounced an' flowered,  
In lutestring striped like the strings o' a fiddle,  
Wi' gowden girdles about my middle.

In your Hielan' glen, where the rain pours steady,  
Ye'll be gay an' glad for a prinkin' leddie;  
Where the rocks are all bare an' the turf is all sodden,  
An' lassies gae sad in their homespun an' hodden.

My silks are stiff wi' patterns o' siller,  
I've an ermine hood like the hat o' a miller,  
I've chains o' coral like rowan berries,  
An' a cramoisie mantle that cam' frae Paris.

Ye'll be glad for the glint o' its scarlet linin'  
When the larks are up an' the sun is shinin';  
When the winds are up an' over the heather  
Your heart'll be gay wi' my gowden feather.

When the skies are low an' the earth is frozen,  
Ye'll be gay an' glad for the leddie ye've chosen,  
When ower the snow I go prinkin' an' prancin'  
In my wee red slippers were made for dancin'.

It's better a leddie like Solomon's lily  
Than one that'll run like a Hielan' gillie  
A-linkin' it ower the leas, my laddie,  
In a raggedy kilt an' a belted plaidie!

## AUGUST

Why should this Negro insolently stride  
Down the red noonday on such noiseless feet?  
Piled in his barrow, tawnier than wheat,  
Lie heaps of smoldering daisies, somber-eyed,  
Their copper petals shriveled up with pride,  
Hot with a superfluity of heat,  
Like a great brazier borne along the street  
By captive leopards, black and burning pied.

Are there no water-lilies, smooth as cream,  
With long stems dripping crystal? Are there none  
Like those white lilies, luminous and cool,  
Plucked from some hemlock-darkened northern stream  
By fair-haired swimmers, diving where the sun  
Scarce warms the surface of the deepest pool?

#### THE CROOKED STICK

First Traveler: What's that lying in the dust?  
Second Traveler: A crooked stick.  
First Traveler: What's it worth, if you can trust  
    To arithmetic?  
Second Traveler: Isn't this a riddle?  
First Traveler:                   No, a trick.  
Second Traveler: It's worthless. Leave it where it lies.  
First Traveler: Wait; count ten;  
    Rub a little dust upon your eyes;  
    Now, look again.  
Second Traveler: Well, and what the devil is it, then?  
First Traveler: It's the sort of crooked stick that shepherds know.  
Second Traveler: Some one's loss!  
First Traveler: Bend it, and you make of it a bow.  
    Break it, a cross.  
Second Traveler: But it's all grown over with moss!

#### ATAVISM

I always was afraid of Somes's Pond:  
Not the little pond, by which the willow stands,  
Where laughing boys catch alewives in their hands  
In brown, bright shallows; but the one beyond.  
There, when the frost makes all the birches burn  
Yellow as cow-lilies, and the pale sky shines  
Like a polished shell between black spruce and pines,  
Some strange thing tracks us, turning where we turn.

You'll say I dream it, being the true daughter  
Of those who in old times endured this dread.  
Look! Where the lily-stems are showing red  
A silent paddle moves below the water,  
A sliding shape has stirred them like a breath;  
Tall plumes surmount a painted mask of death.

## WILD PEACHES

1

When the world turns completely upside down  
You say we'll emigrate to the Eastern Shore  
Aboard a river-boat from Baltimore;  
We'll live among wild peach trees, miles from town.  
You'll wear a coonskin cap, and I a gown  
Homespun, dyed butternut's dark gold color.  
Lost, like your lotus-eating ancestor,  
We'll swim in milk and honey till we drown.

The winter will be short, the summer long,  
The autumn amber-hued, sunny and hot,  
Tasting of cider and of scuppernong;  
All seasons sweet, but autumn best of all.  
The squirrels in their silver fur will fall  
Like falling leaves, like fruit, before your shot.

2

The autumn frosts will lie upon the grass  
Like bloom on grapes of purple-brown and gold.  
The misted early mornings will be cold;  
The little puddles will be roofed with glass.  
The sun, which burns from copper into brass,  
Melts these at noon, and makes the boys unfold  
Their knitted mufflers; full as they can hold,  
Fat pockets dribble chestnuts as they pass.

Peaches grow wild, and pigs can live in clover;  
A barrel of salted herrings lasts a year;  
The spring begins before the winter's over.  
By February you may find the skins  
Of garter snakes and water moccasins  
Dwindled and harsh, dead-white and cloudy-clear.

3

When April pours the colors of a shell  
Upon the hills, when every little creek  
Is shot with silver from the Chesapeake  
In shoals new-minted by the ocean swell,  
When strawberries go begging, and the sleek  
Blue plums lie open to the blackbird's beak,  
We shall live well--we shall live very well.

The months between the cherries and the peaches  
Are brimming cornucopias which spill  
Fruits red and purple, somber-bloomed and black;  
Then, down rich fields and frosty river beaches  
We'll trample bright persimmons, while we kill  
Bronze partridge, speckled quail, and canvas-back.

4

Down to the Puritan marrow of my bones  
There's something in this richness that I hate.  
I love the look, austere, immaculate,  
Of landscapes drawn in pearly monotones.  
There's something in my very blood that owns  
Bare hills, cold silver on a sky of slate,  
A thread of water, churned to milky spate  
Streaming through slanted pastures fenced with stones.

I love those skies, thin blue or snowy gray,  
Those fields sparse-planted, rendering meager sheaves;  
That spring, briefer than apple-blossom's breath,  
Summer, so much too beautiful to stay,  
Swift autumn, like a bonfire of leaves,  
And sleepy winter, like the sleep of death.

#### SANCTUARY

This is the bricklayer; hear the thud  
Of his heavy load dumped down on stone.  
His lustrous bricks are brighter than blood,  
His smoking mortar whiter than bone.

Set each sharp-edged, fire-bitten brick  
Straight by the plumb-line's shivering length;  
Make my marvelous wall so thick  
Dead nor living may shake its strength.

Full as a crystal cup with drink  
Is my cell with dreams, and quiet, and cool....  
Stop, old man! You must leave a chink;  
How can I breathe? \_You can't, you fool!\_

#### THE LION AND THE LAMB



I saw a Tiger's golden flank,  
I saw what food he ate,  
By a desert spring he drank;  
The Tiger's name was Hate.

Then I saw a placid Lamb  
Lying fast asleep;  
Like a river from its dam  
Flashed the Tiger's leap.

I saw a Lion tawny-red,  
Terrible and brave;  
The Tiger's leap overhead  
Broke like a wave.

In sand below or sun above  
He faded like a flame.  
The Lamb said, "I am Love";  
"Lion, tell your name."

The Lion's voice thundering  
Shook his vaulted breast,  
"I am Love. By this spring,  
Brother, let us rest."

#### THE CHURCH-BELL

As I was lying in my bed  
I heard the church-bell ring;  
Before one solemn word was said  
A bird began to sing.

I heard a dog begin to bark  
And a bold crowing cock;  
The bell, between the cold and dark,  
Tolled. It was five o'clock.

The church-bell tolled, and the bird sang,  
A clear true voice he had;  
The cock crew, and the church-bell rang,  
I knew it had gone mad.

A hand reached down from the dark skies,  
It took the bell-rope thong,  
The bell cried "Look! Lift up your eyes!"  
The clapper shook to song.

The iron clapper laughed aloud,

Like clashing wind and wave;  
The bell cried out "Be strong and proud!"  
Then, with a shout, "Be brave!"

The rumbling of the market-carts,  
The pounding of men's feet  
Were drowned in song; "Lift up your hearts!"  
The sound was loud and sweet.

Slow and slow the great bell swung,  
It hung in the steeple mute;  
And people tore its living tongue  
Out by the very root.

#### A CROWDED TROLLEY CAR

The rain's cold grains are silver-gray  
Sharp as golden sands,  
A bell is clanging, people sway  
Hanging by their hands.

Supple hands, or gnarled and stiff,  
Snatch and catch and grope;  
That face is yellow-pale, as if  
The fellow swung from rope.

Dull like pebbles, sharp like knives,  
Glances strike and glare,  
Fingers tangle, Bluebeard's wives  
Dangle by the hair.

Orchard of the strangest fruits  
Hanging from the skies;  
Brothers, yet insensate brutes  
Who fear each others' eyes.

One man stands as free men stand,  
As if his soul might be  
Brave, unbroken; see his hand  
Nailed to an oaken tree.

#### BELLS IN THE RAIN

Sleep falls, with limpid drops of rain,  
Upon the steep cliffs of the town.

Sleep falls; men are at peace again  
Awhile the small drops fall softly down.

The bright drops ring like bells of glass  
Thinned by the wind, and lightly blown;  
Sleep cannot fall on peaceful grass  
So softly as it falls on stone.

Peace falls unheeded on the dead  
Asleep; they have had deep peace to drink;  
Upon a live man's bloody head  
It falls most tenderly, I think.

#### WINTER SLEEP

When against earth a wooden heel  
Clicks as loud as stone and steel,  
When snow turns flour instead of flakes,  
And frost bakes clay as fire bakes,  
When the hard-bitten fields at last  
Crack like iron flawed in the cast,  
When the world is wicked and cross and old,  
I long to be quit of the cruel cold.

Little birds like bubbles of glass  
Fly to other Americas,  
Birds as bright as sparkles of wine  
Fly in the night to the Argentine,  
Birds of azure and flame-birds go  
To the tropical Gulf of Mexico:  
They chase the sun, they follow the heat,  
It is sweet in their bones, O sweet, sweet, sweet!  
It's not with them that I'd love to be,  
But under the roots of the balsam tree.

Just as the spiniest chestnut-burr  
Is lined within with the finest fur,  
So the stony-walled, snow-roofed house  
Of every squirrel and mole and mouse  
Is lined with thistledown, sea-gull's feather,  
Velvet mullein-leaf, heaped together  
With balsam and juniper, dry and curled,  
Sweeter than anything else in the world.  
O what a warm and darksome nest  
Where the wildest things are hidden to rest!  
It's there that I'd love to lie and sleep,  
Soft, soft, soft, and deep, deep, deep!

## VILLAGE MYSTERY

The woman in the pointed hood  
And cloak blue-gray like a pigeon's wing,  
Whose orchard climbs to the balsam-wood,  
Has done a cruel thing.

To her back door-step came a ghost,  
A girl who had been ten years dead,  
She stood by the granite hitching-post  
And begged for a piece of bread.

Now why should I, who walk alone,  
Who am ironical and proud,  
Turn, when a woman casts a stone  
At a beggar in a shroud?

I saw the dead girl cringe and whine,  
And cower in the weeping air--  
But, oh, she was no kin of mine,  
And so I did not care!

## SUNSET ON THE SPIRE

All that I dream  
By day or night  
Lives in that stream  
Of lovely light.  
Here is the earth,  
And there is the spire;  
This is my hearth,  
And that is my fire.  
From the sun's dome  
I am shouted proof  
That this is my home,  
And that is my roof.  
Here is my food,  
And here is my drink,  
And I am wooed  
From the moon's brink.  
And the days go over,  
And the nights end;  
Here is my lover,  
Here is my friend.  
All that I  
Could ever ask

Wears that sky  
Like a thin gold mask.

## ESCAPE

When foxes eat the last gold grape,  
And the last white antelope is killed,  
I shall stop fighting and escape  
Into a little house I'll build.

But first I'll shrink to fairy size,  
With a whisper no one understands,  
Making blind moons of all your eyes,  
And muddy roads of all your hands.

And you may grope for me in vain  
In hollows under the mangrove root,  
Or where, in apple-scented rain,  
The silver wasp-nests hang like fruit.

## THE FAIRY GOLDSMITH

Here's a wonderful thing,  
A humming-bird's wing  
In hammered gold,  
And store well chosen  
Of snowflakes frozen  
In crystal cold.

Black onyx cherries  
And mistletoe berries  
Of chrysoprase,  
Jade buds, tight shut,  
All carven and cut  
In intricate ways.

Here, if you please  
Are little gilt bees  
In amber drops  
Which look like honey,  
Translucent and sunny,  
From clover-tops.

Here's an elfin girl  
Of mother-of-pearl

And moonshine made,  
With tortoise-shell hair  
Both dusky and fair  
In its light and shade.

Here's lacquer laid thin,  
Like a scarlet skin  
On an ivory fruit;  
And a filigree frost  
Of frail notes lost  
From a fairy lute.

Here's a turquoise chain  
Of sun-shower rain  
To wear if you wish;  
And glimmering green  
With aquamarine,  
A silvery fish.

Here are pearls all strung  
On a thread among  
Pretty pink shells;  
And bubbles blown  
From the opal stone  
Which ring like bells.

Touch them and take them,  
But do not break them!  
Beneath your hand  
They will wither like foam  
If you carry them home  
Out of fairy-land.

O, they never can last  
Though you hide them fast  
From moth and from rust;  
In your monstrous day  
They will crumble away  
Into quicksilver dust.

"FIRE AND SLEET AND CANDLELIGHT"

For this you've striven  
Daring, to fail:  
Your sky is riven  
Like a tearing veil.

For this, you've wasted  
Wings of your youth;

Divined, and tasted  
Bitter springs of truth.

From sand unslaked  
Twisted strong cords,  
And wandered naked  
Among trysted swords.

There's a word unspoken,  
A knot untied.  
Whatever is broken  
The earth may hide.

The road was jagged  
Over sharp stones:  
Your body's too ragged  
To cover your bones.

The wind scatters  
Tears upon dust;  
Your soul's in tatters  
Where the spears thrust.

Your race is ended--  
See, it is run:  
Nothing is mended  
Under the sun.

Straight as an arrow  
You fall to a sleep  
Not too narrow  
And not too deep.

## BLOOD FEUD

Once, when my husband was a child, there came  
To his father's table, one who called him kin,  
In sunbleached corduroys paler than his skin.  
His look was grave and kind; he bore the name  
Of the dead singer of Senlac, and his smile.  
Shyly and courteously he smiled and spoke;  
"I've been in the laurel since the winter broke;  
Four months, I reckon; yes, sir, quite a while."

He'd killed a score of foemen in the past,  
In some blood-feud, a dark and monstrous thing;  
To him it seemed his duty. At the last  
His enemies found him by a forest spring,  
Which, as he died, lay bright beneath his head,

A silver shield that slowly turned to red.

#### SEA LULLABY

The old moon is tarnished  
With smoke of the flood,  
The dead leaves are varnished  
With color like blood,

A treacherous smiler  
With teeth white as milk,  
A savage beguiler  
In sheathings of silk,

The sea creeps to pillage,  
She leaps on her prey;  
A child of the village  
Was murdered to-day.

She came up to meet him  
In a smooth golden cloak,  
She choked him and beat him  
To death, for a joke.

Her bright locks were tangled,  
She shouted for joy,  
With one hand she strangled  
A strong little boy.

Now in silence she lingers  
Beside him all night  
To wash her long fingers  
In silvery light.

#### NANCY

You are a rose, but set with sharpest spine;  
You are a pretty bird that pecks at me;  
You are a little squirrel on a tree,  
Pelting me with the prickly fruit of the pine;  
A diamond, torn from a crystal mine,  
Not like that milky treasure of the sea  
A smooth, translucent pearl, but skilfully  
Carven to cut, and faceted to shine.



If you are flame, it dances and burns blue;  
If you are light, it pierces like a star  
Intenser than a needlepoint of ice.  
The dexterous touch that shaped the soul of you,  
Mingled, to mix, and make you what you are,  
Magic between the sugar and the spice.

#### A PROUD LADY

Hate in the world's hand  
Can carve and set its seal  
Like the strong blast of sand  
Which cuts into steel.

I have seen how the finger of hate  
Can mar and mold  
Faces burned passionate  
And frozen cold.

Sorrowful faces worn  
As stone with rain,  
Faces writhing with scorn  
And sullen with pain.

But you have a proud face  
Which the world cannot harm,  
You have turned the pain to a grace  
And the scorn to a charm.

You have taken the arrows and slings  
Which prick and bruise  
And fashioned them into wings  
For the heels of your shoes.

From the world's hand which tries  
To tear you apart  
You have stolen the falcon's eyes  
And the lion's heart.

What has it done, this world,  
With hard finger tips,  
But sweetly chiseled and curled  
Your inscrutable lips?

#### THE TORTOISE IN ETERNITY

Within my house of patterned horn  
I sleep in such a bed  
As men may keep before they're born  
And after they are dead.

Sticks and stones may break their bones,  
And words may make them bleed;  
There is not one of them who owns  
An armor to his need.

Tougher than hide or lozenged bark,  
Snow-storm and thunder proof,  
And quick with sun, and thick with dark,  
Is this my darling roof.

Men's troubled dreams of death and birth  
Pulse mother-o'-pearl to black;  
I bear the rainbow bubble Earth  
Square on my scornful back.

#### INCANTATION

A white well  
In a black cave;  
A bright shell  
In a dark wave.

A white rose  
Black brambles hood;  
Smooth bright snows  
In a dark wood.

A flung white glove  
In a dark fight;  
A white dove  
On a wild black night.

A white door  
In a dark lane;  
A bright core  
To bitter black pain.

A white hand  
Waved from dark walls;  
In a burnt black land  
Bright waterfalls.

A bright spark

Where black ashes are;  
In the smothering dark  
One white star.

#### SILVER FILIGREE

The icicles wreathing  
On trees in festoon  
Swing, swayed to our breathing:  
They're made of the moon.

She's a pale, waxen taper;  
And these seem to drip  
Transparent as paper  
From the flame of her tip.

Molten, smoking a little,  
Into crystal they pass;  
Falling, freezing, to brittle  
And delicate glass.

Each a sharp-pointed flower,  
Each a brief stalactite  
Which hangs for an hour  
In the blue cave of night.

#### THE FALCON

Why should my sleepy heart be taught  
To whistle mocking-bird replies?  
This is another bird you've caught,  
Soft-feathered, with a falcon's eyes.

The bird Imagination,  
That flies so far, that dies so soon;  
Her wings are colored like the sun,  
Her breast is colored like the moon.

Weave her a chain of silver twist,  
And a little hood of scarlet wool,  
And let her perch upon your wrist,  
And tell her she is beautiful.

BRONZE TRUMPETS AND SEA WATER--  
ON TURNING LATIN INTO ENGLISH

Alembics turn to stranger things  
Strange things, but never while we live  
Shall magic turn this bronze that sings  
To singing water in a sieve.

The trumpeters of Caesar's guard  
Salute his rigorous bastions  
With ordered bruit; the bronze is hard  
Though there is silver in the bronze.

Our mutable tongue is like the sea,  
Curled wave and shattering thunder-fit;  
Dangle in strings of sand shall be  
Who smooths the ripples out of it.

SPRING PASTORAL

Liza, go steep your long white hands  
In the cool waters of that spring  
Which bubbles up through shiny sands  
The color of a wild-dove's wing.

Dabble your hands, and steep them well  
Until those nails are pearly white  
Now rosier than a laurel bell;  
Then come to me at candle-light.

Lay your cold hands across my brows,  
And I shall sleep, and I shall dream  
Of silver-pointed willow boughs  
Dipping their fingers in a stream.

VELVET SHOES

Let us walk in the white snow  
In a soundless space;  
With footsteps quiet and slow,  
At a tranquil pace,  
Under veils of white lace.

I shall go shod in silk,  
And you in wool,  
White as a white cow's milk,  
More beautiful  
Than the breast of a gull.

We shall walk through the still town  
In a windless peace;  
We shall step upon white down,  
Upon silver fleece,  
Upon softer than these.

We shall walk in velvet shoes:  
Wherever we go  
Silence will fall like dews  
On white silence below.  
We shall walk in the snow.

#### VALENTINE

Too high, too high to pluck  
My heart shall swing.  
A fruit no bee shall suck,  
No wasp shall sting.

If on some night of cold  
It falls to ground  
In apple-leaves of gold  
I'll wrap it round.

And I shall seal it up  
With spice and salt,  
In a carven silver cup,  
In a deep vault.

Before my eyes are blind  
And my lips mute,  
I must eat core and rind  
Of that same fruit.

Before my heart is dust  
At the end of all,  
Eat it I must, I must  
Were it bitter gall.

But I shall keep it sweet  
By some strange art;  
Wild honey I shall eat  
When I eat my heart.

O honey cool and chaste  
As clover's breath!  
Sweet Heaven I shall taste  
Before my death.

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