

Vernon Watkins (1906-67)

1 *Ballad of Crawley Woods*

Who guards the secret of this wood  
Dropping from hill to wave?  
What monster bids a virgin good  
Rise up from his own grave  
And walk the road and then return, 5  
Taught by the moving leaves?  
What legend from a lettered urn  
Heaves when the forest heaves?

A whispering, violent, vaunting wind  
Can turn the branches pale, 10  
Can make the eyes of hazels blind  
And blasphemy prevail:  
'Rise up, rise up, Rhossili Sands,  
Beat on a pagan drum!  
You with a missal in your hands, 15  
Put down your book, and come.'

. . . . .

A skeleton rose near Crawley Woods,  
Heaved the gravestone back.  
Dock-leaves covered his ankle-bones.  
The night around was black. 20  
'Now that the dark is thick,' he said,  
'No footstep on the road,  
I, that never found human love,  
May find the love of God.'

'O cock your head, O cock your head,' 25  
The lovely darkness cried,

‘There goes that horseman riding;  
We love to hear him ride;  
Gallop from Rhossili Sands  
Along that edge of spray, 30  
Spurring the horse beneath his hands  
To April’s bridal day.’

‘My mind runs back to summertime.  
I kept a sacred fast.  
I, to an ash along a wall 35  
Rooted in the Past  
That put forth leaves of living green  
Although it lay there prone,  
Returned from windy Paviland  
To live my life alone.’ 40

What branches rouse above his head?  
What noise of wind and sea?  
About him all the quick and dead  
Are keeping company;  
And past him leaves and spectres race, 45  
Each with a secret bride,  
Seeking in earth a dancing-place,  
In roots a place to hide.

What sudden terror shakes the trees,  
What thunder-clap of whips? 50  
‘Under the wind with kisses,  
Your weight beneath my lips!’  
What do the whirling dead leaves say,  
Vanishing to the South?  
‘Under the night in your dear arms, 55  
Ah lift me, mouth to mouth!’

‘O cock your head, O cock your head:  
Married by a chain,  
These the storm that whirled asleep

Now whirls awake again. 60  
Very fine chains they carry,  
Slender chains of gold.  
All these the night-winds marry  
Must wed beneath the mould.

O, had you kissed the fresh green leaf, 65  
Not the leaf that was bound,  
You would be riding fast asleep,  
Riding under the ground  
With Paolo and Francesca  
Whom Dante found in Hell. 70  
Every whirling withered leaf  
Leads you to some cell.'

'Where goes Rhossili's rider,  
And where, these restless dead?  
I trespass everywhere I walk 75  
On some lover's bed.  
Who roused this hunger in my sleep?  
Who prised me from my mound?  
Why does my soul imagine rape?  
Why do the leaves run round?' 80

. . . . .

Now this is the Ballad of Crawley Woods;  
No more is there to say.  
Now let the rich man give his goods,  
Nor keep the poor away,  
But think of him who lies there still 85  
And wishes all men well,  
Hearing the branches on the hill,  
Hearing the breakers' bell.

Though long he lay in death's embrace,  
That tree and wall were true. 90

The rose in that rose-window  
Knew every leaf that grew.  
For him each single drop of dew  
Trembled, a world of praise.  
The secret of the dead he knew  
None but their Christ can raise.

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