

*Stranger, stranger, on some far shore
Hast thou a city? Is there a door
That knows thy footfall, wandering one?*
EURIPIDES

Here we have no continuing city, but we seek one to come.
HEB. 13:14

WESTERN RHYMES

BY
GEERHARDUS VOS

PUBLISHED BY THE AUTHOR
PRINTED BY A.G. FLAGG
SANTA ANA, CALIFORNIA
1933

Note: This is not the pagination of the original edition

Nativity	3
Futile Ploughing	6
Communism	11
The Solitary Tree	13
In Albuquerque	14
California	15
San Diego	16
The Mission Bell	17
Bird Tragedy	17
Fences	19
Trees and Trees	19
Animal Tragedy	21
Outside and Within	21
Icarus	22
Beatitude	22
Disquietude	23
The Moment	24
Canaan	24
A Little Friend	25
My House	25
Autumn's Ending	26
Time	27
The End	28

NATIVITY

Ye listeners to the tale retold,
What do your wondering eyes behold?

A babe that, scarcely given, gives,
Its every breath a grace that lives;

Giver and gift and sacrament,
All merged in one and manward bent;

Entering our kind and ours alone,
Flesh of our flesh, bone of our bone;

The uncreated Light of Light,
Heaven's noonday, swallowed by our night;

Guileless, incapable of wrong,
More than the lambs He lay among;

His smallness laden with our sin;
Born that his birth-cries might begin

Full thirty years of tragedy,
Each step a step toward Calvary.

And this is the high-holy spot,
Angels are sad to visit not!

Here undergird God's cords of gold
Our earth, and it from falling hold

Into the desperate abyss,
Where love not even a memory is.

This is the blest alighting ground
Of grace, whence it shall circle round

With one wide-flung redeeming span
All sin and sorrow and pain of man,

And make new paradise streams flow,
That from God's throne through Eden go;

Yea cause all things now mute and dim
Again to shine and sing in Him.

If this ye in the manger see,
A promise and a prophecy

Of what was for the future willed,
Observe a thing even now fulfilled,

Well worth to open wide your eyes:
Close to the babe, transfigured, lies

She through whom God the Christ-gift gave
The world both and herself to save.

Lest thou the full-orbed glory miss,
Note well the mother's part in this;

The greatest masters of the brush
Put more here than the solemn hush

Of just awakened motherhood,
Trembling at its beatitude;

They tried to limn a mystery
Of God-encompassed ecstasy;

But God, who first the image drew,
Knows more than ever artist knew;

His work is the Madonna-face
With its uncopyable grace,

Where, as in a pellucid stream,
To Him his own eyes mirrored seem.

The light God saw in Mary shine,
The inmost shrine within her shrine,

The whitest flame within the flame:
Religion is its holy name.

From it proceeded the groundswell
Upheaved in her high canticle:

The feeling of unworthiness,
Not loath, but eager, to confess

Itself but chosen instrument,
A chord through which God's music went,

Like pulses throbbing through the frame
Back to the heart-pulse whence they came;

A hymn unaging, ever new,
An organ-peal the ages through,

Singing: "The handmaid of the Lord,
Me be according to thy word,"

Made through a fine simplicity
Mindless of its own melody,

Anxious alone that God should hear
A virgin strain pleasing his ear,

Sensing as from within God's mind,
Why He exalts the humble kind,

Puts down the mighty from their seats,
The hungry with his fullness meets,

And, rising high above the thought,
That aught could in return be brought,

Perceives how all the blessed live
Only, that God may give and give.

So Mary, with naught else to bring,
Made her sweet Psalm an offering,

Wherein the Lord such pleasure found,
He let it through the world resound,

To bless our ears each Christmas night
With notes like drops of liquid light,

So clear we mean to hear in them
The very voice of Bethlehem,

As had by Mary's side we sat,
And drunk of her "Magnificat."

FUTILE PLOUGHING

“Shall horses run upon the rock,
Shall oxen plough the sea?”
So ran the questions meant to mark
A sheer absurdity.

Amos, the cowherd-prophet, knew
The quaint old proverb well,
And took it up to stigmatize
The sin of Israel.

They had perversely turned the fruit
Of righteousness and all
The life-trees planted for their health
To wormwood and to gall.

Therefore Jehovah swore an oath:
He would for them ordain
A poison-cup whose lethal dregs
Should all the sinners drain.

A like perversion He would work,
That would lay low their crown,
And turn the structure of their state
By one stroke upside down.

And He decreed his people's walk
From that day on should be,
Under the hiding of his face,
A walk in tragedy,

A play through which the players passed,
Mute figures in a dream,
Scarce half-way conscious of their parts,
So strange God's work would seem.

No sense of ancient promises,
Grace-fragrant, lingered there;
The summons to repentance died
On the doom-pregnant air.

Yea, even the true prophet's mind,
Though intimate with God,
Dwelt in a dumb bewilderment,

Fore-visioning the rod.

For he divined the fatal close
To which the drama sped,
Since in the dread divine decree
He had its issue read.

His mouth grew bitter ere the cup
Yet reached the people's lips,
Compelled to taste the overflow
That from the brim-side drips.

The prophet drinks not once but twice:
The first time he alone,
Jehovah's solitary guest,
Both hour and place unknown;

He drinks again when enters in
Israel upon its night,
Sharing all the distress and woe
By himself prophesied.

The Lord moves in a gradual way
To bring his judgments near,
So that the first-inflicted pain
May transient, slight appear.

Then, suddenly, He makes it dark,
Clouds overcast the sky,
His thunder-peals reverberate,
His lightning arrows fly.

The chaos of primeval times
Now threatens to return;
The mountains sink, the depths upheave,
And lofty forests burn.

The strong sluice-gates are opened wide,
That safe-emprisoned keep
The world-surrounding ocean flood,
Upper and nether deep.

At that the Lord Himself descends
To render recompense,
With in his wake the Egyptian plagues,

Hindmost the pestilence.

Put thyself in the prophet's stead,
Close to the ground thine ear:
What means this muffled swelling sound,
Far off, yet far too near?

It means a noisy-booted host,
Approaching from where flanks
The Northern pass the mountain steeps,
No straggler in its ranks.

But dreadful more than marching foes,
Shaking the road like these,
Is God who brought Orion forth,
And formed the Pleiades,

The measure of whose judgment lies
Not in created frames,
But in the might that bade them be,
And calls them by their names.

Despite the fury of the storm,
The violence of the blast,
The prophet took Jehovah's side,
His servant till the last.

God's justice clothed itself with him,
And gave him for the hour
A superhuman energy,
A nigh-demonic power.

It drove him as the tempest drives,
Which hut nor palace spares,
Into the thickest of the fray
With godless gainsayers.

Then carried him, as wings a bird,
Aloft to upmost air,
To find, when wounded from the strife
For God, his healing there.

Alas, his heart refused to heal
From sorrow for the woe,
Jehovah through his ministry

Made Israel undergo.

He could not hold himself apart,
Even though he tried to sift
The pious from the hardened mass,
It bared a deeper rift,

The chasm each prophet shudders at,
By other eyes unseen,
His Sender's sovereign holiness
And Israel's hope between.

But never so intense the pain,
So desperate the despair,
But that the spirit burst its bonds,
And found its God in prayer.

As Abram once made very bold,
And would not be denied,
When, bartering, he with El-Shaddai
For Lot and Sodom cried,

So Amos for a moment fell
From his doom-herald's role,
And asked with tears, the Lord of Hosts
Might grant him Israel's soul.

The deepest note drawn from his heart
Was like a mother's plea:
"Have mercy on the Jacob-child,
Behold, so small is he!"

At first it seemed he might prevail:
The insect-scourge was staved;
Quenched was the scorching fire that leaves
Green pastures desolate.

Alas, in vain: his eyes beheld
Jehovah's figure stand,
As by a wall the wrecker stands,
The plumb-line in his hand.

The vision of that hour forebode
Irrevocable woe,
For nothing straight the plumbline found

Among the high or low.

The trance was brief, but he awoke
A pale-faced, unnerved man:
His eyes had seen the captives go,
A doleful caravan.

His judgment-mission was fulfilled;
He left the verdict there;
God sent him to Thekoa back,
The oxen for to care.

Oft, as he followed in their tracks,
Pruning the sour wild figs,
He fancied the advent drew near
Of God's apocalypse.

Him seemed, as had the proverb turned
Its reference round about,
That, looking back, he was the man
Who on the rocks had ploughed.

But God, who bade him prophesy
Against the hearts of stone,
Made clear he had not prophesied
For judgment's sake alone.

He was shown things in a mirage
That never on earth distil:
The mountains dropping down new wine,
Milk-springs on every hill,

And from near by a cooling sound
Of rivers carrying grace,
And over all the landscape smiled
The beauty of God's face.

COMMUNISM

Suffering unites all mortal flesh
A mystic bond of pain,
With little easement or surcease
From gods or men to gain.

It reigns coeval with the sway
Of sin upon the race;
A Job and a Prometheus bore
It written on their face.

Nor sex, nor age, nor rank exempts
From its conscriptive law;
None are too young to register,
The old may not withdraw.

But, added to this equal lot,
By all in common shared,
The potion of a special cup
For many is prepared.

No friend shall help thee when that cup
Is placed upon thy hand;
Suffering is self, and who shall self
Of others understand?

Nor shalt thou for thy brother's sin
By sympathy atone;
And didst thou love him unto death,
His death he dies alone.

O captive soul, o lonely bird,
Is there no help for thee?
Must thou be like an animal
Caged with thy misery?

Listen, how from behind the bars,
Unopened ever so long,
A little throat pours note on note
To ease its pain in song.

What sings the bird within the cage,
That freedom never knew?
It sings the sunshine on the fields,

The sky's unfathomed blue,

The woodland air, the blossoms fair,
The mating in the Spring,
As though it in the ether soared
With light up-carrying wing.

Or, if on a more plaintive note
For once its breath be spent,
'T is not a plaint born from restraint
Of own imprisonment,

But from what woe was long ago
Sore suffered, never sung;
Race-memories in the music wake,
The ages find their tongue.

So, if thy suffering make thee sing,
Let thine own narrow pain
But the light-touched-on prelude be
That opens larger strain;

A strain shall drown the sense of self
In the deep monotone
Of sorrow by the aeons sung,
Their immemorial moan,

The dirge the ancient wind doth play
On every ancient tree,
Which long before men sang the shore
Heard sing the restless sea.

Then shalt thou leave of things that grieve
The bitterness behind,
And for the tumult in thy breast
A great katharsis find.

Who thus can sing their suffering
Shall walk in company
With the sublime interpreters
Of God's world-tragedy.

They know what neither wistful bird
Nor groaning beast can know:
The Prince of Pain with all his train

Is a thrice-vanquished foe.

They can, a paean on their lips,
The final onslaught meet,
Surpassing conquerors in the fight,
Of sufferers God's elite.¹

THE SOLITARY TREE

O tree behind the hogan,
Lonely, unmated tree!
The priest comes to visit the Indian,
Brings he no gospel for thee?

Thou shadest both thatch and adobe,
Faithful, unselfishly,
Thy crown exposed to the sun glare,
Is there no shadow for thee?

I know of a man who has promised
The creature shall once be free
Of its man-inflicted bondage,
And that is inclusive of thee.

IN ALBUQUERQUE

In Albuquerque's city-square
A woman-figure stands,
Sculptured in plain old-fashioned dress,
With work-acquainted hands.

Intent her eager pilgrim-eyes
The Westward spaces scan
For the Pacific paradise
That lured the caravan.

All mothers' eyes are prophets' eyes,
Since Eden forward turned,
Drawn on by an eternal light
Wherewith the promise burned.

Did those she stands for apprehend,
Death might dispute the trail?
Death, from whom no outrider shields,
Whose arrows never fail?

The covered-wagon still survives
In picture and romance;
Some tourists fancy that its ghost
Still haunts the desert sands.

Their swift cars on the pavement glide,
Nor heat nor sandstorms fear,
With mileage in one hour that took
Long days the pioneer.

The pride of speed mounts to their heads,
Of pistons, gears and rods
They veritable masters feel,
The living engine's gods.

Have they forgot the shallow graves,
Where for a while the bones
Of their space-conquered mothers lay,
Left without marking-stones?

We seek our dead and find them not;
But find at least the mound
Where each was put; of yonder graves

Shall never a trace be found.

Therefore it seems supremely fit,
That for a late amends
The daughters of our time should raise
These mother-monuments.

CALIFORNIA

Fair land, so fair it gives the mind distress
To think that people of our common clay,
Dwelling in thee, may mar or render less
Thy serene charm by what men do or say.
I, like a lover, my unworthiness confess;
Here should but pure Elysian spirits play.
Wonder, beholding thee, can scarce suppress
A haunting sense at times, as though there lay
Beneath this raiment still more exquisite a dress,
Covered to hide from mortal gaze away
The too entrancing vision of its loveliness.

SAN DIEGO

Thou liest in light and splendor
As scarce imagined them,
The seers and the singers
That hymned Jerusalem.

Their other-world born vision
Begot a rapturous art,
That made to far off regions
Leap jointly tongue and heart.

Thine are the nearer glories
That sober eyes can see
Without the need of tasting
A wine of ecstasy.

On thee glad waves are smiling
Within thy sheltered bay;
The sea's deep-throated laughter
Adds music night and day.

Laced through with threads of sunlight,
Translucent rise thy towers;
The mission-story's fragrance
Still mingles with the flowers'.

High in the niche's rounding
The saintly Sierra stands,
A patron and a shepherd
To all the Christened lands.

Far mountains waft thee breezes
From forest slopes thereon,
As over Canaan wafted
The cedared Lebanon.

City of much adoring,
My mistress of the South,
Whose very name is sweetness
Within thy lover's mouth,

Remember, when thy sunset
In flaming waters sinks:
Behind thee sleeps the desert,

An evil-dreaming sphinx.

THE MISSION BELL

This is, in miniature, the mission-bell,
Once tolled to tell
The Indians round San Gabriel
Of holy offices about
To be performed, and to ring out
With solemn sound the dying and the dead;
Which used at the nativity to spread
The fragrance of the feast through every vale and hill;
May it, as sent to thee, render some service still.
Keep it among thy things for my remembrance sake;
And when the shears of Death between us severance make,
When thou art told that I have ceased to be,
Then give it, pray, the needful taps for me,
According to the years we shall have known
Each other. When, long hence, thine own
Departure to the far, strange, tuneless land
Approaches, then may a most loving hand
Touch it for thee to hallow thy last slumber,
And may the taps greatly exceed in number
Those few for my short pilgrimage required,
Recording all the golden years my heart for thee desired.

BIRD TRAGEDY

Ye birds, no fence can bar you out,
Whether of steel or stone,
From any garden of delight
Ye choose to make your own.

Yours were the freedom of the fields,
Could ye beware the nets,
Which, to beguile your innocence,
The crafty fowler sets.

Yours is the sky up to the clouds;
But from huge birds of prey
Is no defence: they lurk and watch,
Swoop down and clutch and slay.

One moment, and a feathery ball
Floats fluttering on the air;
No one knows, did it reach the earth,
Or, if it did so, where.

Should by incalculable chance
It light upon the spot,
Where hung the sheltering mother-nest,
The place would know it not.

What a pathetic tragedy,
That such things should befall,
In ways so disproportionate,
The big upon the small!

Come, hear the Preacher of the Mount
His wonder-sermon preach:
“No sparrow falleth to the ground
Outside my Father’s reach.”

Ye more than sparrows through his grace,
All your anxiety,
Your heights and depths, your falls and flights
He has in memory.

All creatures are, with Him compared,
Mere nothings; none the less
He can reclaim a ravished bird
From next to nothingness.

FENCES

Could rabbits only read the signs
That trespassing forbid,
They then might lead protected lives,
From dogs and huntsmen hid.

Alas, for men, who read, no signs
Are set by post or gate,
To shield from the Arch-Hunter Death,
Who finds them soon or late.

TREES AND TREES

Some trees delight in rich mulched soil,
Where, free from growing-pains and toil
They may increase their height and girth,
Receive each Spring a larger birth,
And in bright-colored blossom-dress
Their virgin-comeliness express,
A wealth of luscious fruitage bear,
No part shut out from sun and air;
Assured that even the underground,
Where roots and earth are marriage-bound,
Partakes of the baptismal grace
The clouds drop down upon its face,
When higher air the fog condenses,
And God his sacrament dispenses
Of early rain and latter rain
And showers that fall betwixt the twain,
So that a mystic interplay,
From leaf to leaf shall find its way,
And through melodious sounds released

Joy in the meadows be increased.
But do not think the breeze alone
Can claim the music as its own:
There are responses from the tree
Needed to make full melody;
And no caresses are complete
Wherein not out- and in-ward meet;
Not different is the close embrace
Twixt tree and wind, twixt faith and grace.
But I know too an other tree,
Remote from garden-witchery,
And all that genial clime suggests,
Exposed through life to hardest tests.
The seed for narrow lodgement found
A rocky crevice in the ground;
Only it took its hold so well,
The crevice could not make a cell
To keep the upward-shooting sprout
From finding a small opening out,
Wherethrough escaped, it dared to mock,
The stark formation of the rock.
At first each separate element
Seemed on its sure extinction bent;
The shale that had the sharpest edge
Pushed sideways to it like a wedge;
For days the High-Sierra wind
Blew on it but left no imprint;
It compromised not with the blast
That over and around it passed;
It stood, what bolts might near it light,
Immune, erect, girded with might;
An aeon-conquering, timeless tree,
Symbol of God's eternity.

ANIMAL TRAGEDY

Oft, when I have, rebellious, sore,
Some turn of lot defamed,
The pathos of an animal's death
Has made me feel ashamed.

Just now I saw a graceful fawn
Hung o'er the butcher's sill:
Surely, poor thing, thou hadst thy share
Of Christmas-time goodwill.

What are our little griefs, compared
To such a tragedy?
Void of reproach, the brown eyes stared.
So still, so piteously.

OUTSIDE AND WITHIN

When I in nature's vast expanses
See her great things befall,
It seems so easy to approach thee,
To tell and ask thee all.

But when into thy holy presence
Mine eager feet have come,
The spirit quails, I stand before thee,
All tremulous and dumb.

ICARUS

When thou dost shine on me the light fills all my sky,
As the largesse, on choicest days that nature spends,
Is so ubiquitous, it makes one wonder why,
Unlimited in space, it should lack permanence.
Brief benison of words, or slight electric touch,
Through loving fingers sent, can so exalt the mood,
That, leaping upward, it discards faith's clumsy crutch,
As though a momentary sacramental food
The rapture could suffice for forty days,
Fixed in assurance of attainment more and more,
Till, care thrown to the winds, too near the sun it plays,
Falls headlong back to earth, alas how crushed and sore!

BEATITUDE

At times the rapt lover's
Transfiguring eyes
Behold the beloved
In God's paradise,
Whose glory's rare glowing
Through her eyes is seen,
And naught seems worth knowing
Of what lies between.

The farthest love-seekers
This faith have confessed,
That deepest in woman
Such sight was their quest;
That nothing can equal
The garden's delight,
Where she sits beholding
God's face, satisfied.

O language, great lover
Of things that hearts frame,
Unerring in giving
To each its own name,
Life-searcher, gold-miner,
“Beatitude,” is
There name, could be finer
For “beauty” than this?

DISQUIETUDE

Silent all song,
The day grows long;
The night was longer;
Sleep fought and pain
O'er me again,
And pain proved stronger.

My quest art thou;
I need thee now;
I need thee ever;
As one made blind
Would sunlight find,
And finds it never.

Though the kind Spring
For solacing
Send song before her,
Yet leaves a bird,
In blindness heard,
The heart but sorer.

When thou art there,
I have no care;
The rest is sorrow.
Some light from thine
Should in me shine
To-day, to-morrow.

THE MOMENT

I stand in reminiscent mood,
Where once we two together stood
In the soft twilights' solitude.

How little then did to our eye
"Has been" or "shall be" signify!
The stream of time had passed us by.

When now my step the same spot nears,
The dirge of time is in my ears:
Loss, vain regrets, misgivings, fears.

The wine wrung out in my soul's press
Is wrung from grapes of sore distress,
The cup is full of bitterness.

Ah, could I step once more inside
That moment, there with thee to hide
Both of us timeless, satisfied!

CANAAN

Love-land is Canaan's land, fair open vales extending,
The star-near hilltops round baptized in limpid light;
Alas, the loveliest road, Southward to Zion bending,
Ends at an inmost shrine withdrawn from lover's sight.

A LITTLE FRIEND

Thy stay was brief, too brief for close entwining
Of tendrils of affection round my heart;
Yet long enough to cause that sad repining,
Spring feels for blasted buds when snows depart.

Thou camest in evil hour; my streams of feeling
Were merged in one great other-ward desire;
A flame burned in mine eyes through which the appealing
Of thy moist eyes was lost as dew in fire.

Why need things, scarcely learned, such slow unlearning?
Must habits form so quickly on time's loom?
Strange sense of following steps, belied by turning!
Illusion of some presence in an empty room!

O old-world pine, through which the winds are soughing
Their dolorous dirge in even, one-toned swell,
What is thy thought of death, his ceaseless ploughing
And harvesting? Art thou too old to tell?

MY HOUSE

O house, my house, which since one far-off morning
Thy richest charm for my delight hast spent,
Towards whose modest joyance and adorning
All my resources, like a lover's, went.

The friendly books inviting to communion
From their familiar places on the shelves;
The pictures on the walls through magic union
Transfiguring colors to rays beyond themselves.

The silent songs thine humble things are singing
From room to room which no outsider hears,
To every mood a tone-companion bringing:
Heart's dance for joy, hushed strains for sorrow and tears.

O house, my house, after the tempest's blowing
Had of these treasures prized left scarce a wreck,
How good it felt to me, when, words foregoing,
Thou threwest just thy bare arms around my neck!

AUTUMN'S ENDING

What joy was ours on seeing the glorious riot
Of Indian Summer's surge the forest overwhelm,
That, from the vision drunk, we asked in wonder, why not
The year wears all around her orange-yellow of din
Or wine-red maple robe, protesting she should die not,
A Queen bedecked with all the jewels of the realm.

Alas, we sobered soon; just at the splendor's highest
It seemed to outblaze itself, and burst into a flame,
Which, by its own breeze fanned, leaped from the nighest
Unto the farthest crowns, consuming where it came
The body as through the garb. Ah Autumn, when thou diest,
'T is in a passion-fire, counts life and death the same.

Thy regal staging scarcely one brief month outlasted;
Bare stand and bleak the trees whereon the glories hung;
Earth's face is shrunk and drawn, like to a nun's who fasted
Both flesh and strength away; not even a sad song sung,
Sound-frozen lies the air, and all the buds are blasted,
That, trusting thy warm smile, to second youth had sprung.

TIME

Time wears a thousand faces. Void of energy
And solid substance, it encompasses all things,
And bears them on its stream to their predestined end.
It is the oldest and the youngest thing in one,
In each new moment dying and given birth therein.
Fair youth, maturity, old age together it binds,
That would, but for this bond, scarce one the other know.
So softly glides it with the dance of youth along,
That to a consciousness the dancer seldom wakes
Of his mute partner's steps, except for feeling them,
Perchance, not quick enough. After, in ripened years,
To men's more sobered minds the stately, measured stride,
Though kept in tune with theirs, is clearly audible;
But such as have obtained the journey's end in view
Feel at their side a press of ominous hastening,
Driving them onward to an unknown, unwilling goal.
It smilingly bestows surpriseful precious gifts,
But also brigand-like lurks at the highway's turn,
And, ere the traveler knows what sprang or struck at him,
Doth leave him naked, stripped of treasure and raiment both.
Again, from brutal fiend to kind physician turned,
It, without medicine, just by mere nursing, heals
Caressingly the wounds, so that their memory,
Transfigured, into a sweet sadness grows.
But to the final call it comes veiled in a shroud,
With gesture of leave-taking, till the very end
Hiding its visage and withholding the last grace
Of frank avowal, whether it leaves us friend or foe,
Lifting the chamber-doorlatch with unturned-back face.

THE END

The cloth is full-woven;
The weaver folds up
The last finished pattern,
Then walks out to sup.
His fingers are stiffened,
His back is sore-bent;
Will eyes grown still dimmer
Hold out till the end?
To weave its own shadows
The night needs the room.
Will it see him next morning
His labor resume?
Old age should stop caring
Nor fret for repairing;
Are not the Norns tending,
Without thought of ending,
Their never outwearing
Nor slowing-up loom?

(Footnotes)

¹ Romans 8:27-39