

FIVE POEMS

By J. AQUILINA

ON A DISTINGUISHED DIPLOMAT

Here lies the skull not of Yorick but of a faithful man of rank
Who served the government of the day with exemplary loyalty,
Won confidences, distinctions, garters and medals galore,
From the highest authorities of the land and even from Royalty.
He was what one would call a very successful man of career.
To prosper so much he had to be terribly shrewd,
Cheating at the highest level for the sake of his masters;
By training, therefore, a hypocrite, though never vulgar or rude,
Till God had pity on him, relieved him of his monotonous duty,
And through the Gates of Death introduced him for the first time
To the ultimate Vision of Honesty and Beauty.
Here ends our rhyme.

Sweet passer-by
Stop for a while;
Turn not your back on the
Buried diplomat
But
Pray God for him and for all diplomats who cheat at high level,
That His favourite Angel, St. Michael, may save them from the Devil.
6.7.1958

THE CHASE

I chase a magnificent bird, blue-plumaged,
Red-breasted and heaven-eyed,
Swifter of nimble feet than wind, or
Rompng clouds edged with
The tapestries of intricate lights.
I came all the way chasing it out of breath
With arms outstretched, camouflage of trees;
Calling it back with whistle, like a cuckoo,
But the bird flies on, to reach the wall
Of the outside garden before it grows dark,
And beyond
In time to go down,
With the setting sun:
My sunset – the sunset of the Bird of Youth.

14.1.1963

YOUTH AND AGE

Guard them well, those pirate treasures
That are your eyes;
Crackless mirror of Youth's pleasures:
Lovers' prize.

Guard them well, those garden creepers
That are your hands:
Intertwining avid feelers,
Shy demands.

Guard them well, those raven tresses
That are your hair
Falling down like warm caresses:
Laugh off cares!

Guard them well, those two curved petals
That are your lips.
Youth's own springs, like burning metals,
Jerk your hips.

Guard your Youth, and guard it whole –
Youth is magic.
Stir the embers, fan the coal –
Age is tragic.

19.3.1964

DEATH

Death should have eyes and pity, should have ears;
Eyes to admire the wonders of man's brains;
And ears to catch the thrill of sweet refrains
Which soothe the feverish brow, dispelling fears.
Death should have hands to feel the falling tears
Which flow from babies' eyes like silver grains;
To feel the lightness, or the weight of chains
Which bind our hands and feet, the thrust of spears.

But death, alas, is made of different stuff,
Made of the nerveless stuff of which are made
The soil we tread upon, hard flint and steel.
Death is the Hungry Beast at large, wild, gruff,
Pursuing Man and Time around a Wheel,
Of which all living nature is afraid.

3.4.1964

THE ESCAPE

"Stop now while you can! This is a long way
From the mountain you spied in the distance.
Do you know this is the Mansion of Despair,
The Mansion of the Thief
Who robs the eye of its iris
And the Rainbow of its seven sashes,
Whose regalia are the Seven Loots of Sin,
The Word and the Flesh,
The lust of the swine?"

Yes, I know – I know that God and I,
Moving in opposite directions
Like two thunderous winds
Have parted company; got out of each other's way.
I neither hear Him nor see Him in my mind's eye,
And when I cry I doubt if my shout
Falls into His bosom; but I know
That He still lights the Traveller's Torch on His mountain,
Sends urgent signals from His turrets
To the Valley of Despair,
But here, where evil spirits congregate
Like shadows at sunset,
Multiplying like the viruses of Cancer,
I cannot yet espy the Traveller's Torch
Lighting the wasteland and marshlands,
Lighting the long way back,
Because beyond the valley that holds me in thrall
There are crags and cliffs
Which tear the flesh of the knees.
I must be left alone now to study the layout
Of the Mansion of the Thief
Who robs the eye of its iris
And the rainbow of its seven sashes.
Pray God send me from his *Seven Workshops*
A ladder, hooks and spanners with a very long rope
To help me escape:
And of your goodness, God,
Take me back!

23. 4. 1964