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D. H. LAWRENCE

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D. H. LAWRENCE

*The
Complete Poems*

COLLECTED AND EDITED WITH AN
INTRODUCTION AND NOTES BY

VIVIAN DE SOLA PINTO AND
WARREN ROBERTS



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REPTILES

"HOMER WAS wrong in saying, 'Would that strife might pass away from among gods and men!' He did not see that he was praying for the destruction of the universe; for, if his prayer were heard, all things would pass away—for in the tension of opposites all things have their being—"

"For when Fire in its downward path chanced to mingle with the dark breath of the earth, the serpent slid forth, lay revealed. But he was moist and cold, the sun in him darted uneasy, held down by moist earth, never could he rise on his feet. And this is what put poison in his mouth. For the sun in him would fain rise half-way, and move on feet. But moist earth weighs him down, though he dart and twist, still he must go with his belly on the ground.—The wise tortoise laid his earthy part around him, he cast it round him and found his feet. So he is the first of creatures to stand upon his toes, and the dome of his house is his heaven. Therefore it is charted out, and is the foundation of the world."

SNAKE

A snake came to my water-trough
On a hot, hot day, and I in pyjamas for the heat,
To drink there.

In the deep, strange-scented shade of the great dark carob-
tree
I came down the steps with my pitcher
And must wait, must stand and wait, for there he was at
the trough before me.

He reached down from a fissure in the earth-wall in the
gloom
And trailed his yellow-brown slackness soft-bellied down,
over the edge of the stone trough
And rested his throat upon the stone bottom,
And where the water had dripped from the tap, in a small
clearness,
He sipped with his straight mouth,
Softly drank through his straight gums, into his slack long
body,
Silently.

Someone was before me at my water-trough,
And I, like a second comer, waiting.

He lifted his head from his drinking, as cattle do,
And looked at me vaguely, as drinking cattle do,
And flickered his two-forked tongue from his lips, and
mused a moment,
And stooped and drank a little more,
Being earth-brown, earth-golden from the burning bowels
of the earth
On the day of Sicilian July, with Etna smoking.

UNRHYMING POEMS

The voice of my education said to me
He must be killed,
For in Sicily the black, black snakes are innocent, the gold
are venomous.

And voices in me said, If you were a man
You would take a stick and break him now, and finish
him off.

But must I confess how I liked him,
How glad I was he had come like a guest in quiet, to drink
at my water-trough
And depart peaceful, pacified, and thankless,
Into the burning bowels of this earth?

Was it cowardice, that I dared not kill him?
Was it perversity, that I longed to talk to him?
Was it humility, to feel so honoured?
I felt so honoured.

And yet those voices:
If you were not afraid, you would kill him!

And truly I was afraid, I was most afraid,
But even so, honoured still more
That he should seek my hospitality
From out the dark door of the secret earth.

He drank enough
And lifted his head, dreamily, as one who has drunken,
And flickered his tongue like a forked light on the air, so
black,
Seeming to lick his lips,
And looked around like a god, unseeing, into the air,
And slowly turned his head,
And slowly, very slowly, as if thrice adream,
Proceeded to draw his slow length curving round
And climb again the broken bank of my wall-face.

UNRHYMING POEMS

And as he put his head into that dreadful hole,
And as he slowly drew up, snake-easing his shoulders, and
entered farther,
A sort of horror, a sort of protest against his withdrawing
into that horrid black hole,
Deliberately going into the blackness, and slowly drawing
himself after,
Overcame me now his back was turned.

I looked round, I put down my pitcher,
I picked up a clumsy log
And threw it at the water-trough with a clatter.

I think it did not hit him,
But suddenly that part of him that was left behind con-
vulsed in undignified haste,
Writhed like lightning, and was gone
Into the black hole, the earth-lipped fissure in the wall-
front,
At which, in the intense still noon, I stared with fascination.

And immediately I regretted it.
I thought how paltry, how vulgar, what a mean act!
I despised myself and the voices of my accursed human
education.

And I thought of the albatross,
And I wished he would come back, my snake.

For he seemed to me again like a king,
Like a king in exile, uncrowned in the underworld,
Now due to be crowned again.

And so, I missed my chance with one of the lords
Of life.
And I have something to expiate;
A pettiness.

Taormina.

letter to Curtis Brown dated 17 September 1921 from Florence with instructions to place them among the "beasts" in *BBF* (Letters, p. 663). Penultimate line: "Jesus was called The Fish. . . ." - c.f. note to *ST MATTHEW*, l. 51, above.

B A T

First published in *The English Review*, November 1922; reprinted in *BBF* and *CP*.

R E P T I L E S

"'Homer was wrong . . . would pass away'" - this passage is Burnet's translation from the Greek of Herakleitos (Fragment 43, Burnet, *op. cit.*, p. 136).

S N A K E

First published in *The Dial*, July 1921; reprinted in *The London Mercury*, October 1921, in *Georgian Poetry 1920-22*, *BBF* and *CP*. This famous poem certainly grew out of Lawrence's actual encounter with a snake which he saw drinking from his water-trough when he was living at Fontana Vecchia, Taormina in 1920-21, but there is a curious anticipation of it in his prose essay "The Reality of Peace" published in May 1917. (See *Phoenix*, p. 678 and Moore, p. 265.)

B A B Y T O R T O I S E

This and the following five poems (the *TORTOISE* sequence) were first published in a volume called *Tortoises* by Thomas Seltzer at New York in 1921 (Roberts, A19). Seltzer published the first edition of *BBF* (Roberts, A27a). He did not include in it the *TORTOISE* poems, but they were included in the first English edition published by Secker (Roberts, A27b) and were reprinted in *CP*. *BABY TORTOISE* was printed also in *The English Review*, November 1922.

T U R K E Y - C O C K

First published in *Poetry*, November 1922; reprinted in *BBF* and *CP*. In a letter to Harriet Monroe from Taos, dated 23 September 1922, Lawrence wrote that this poem was one of his favourites (Letters, p. 719).

l. 89: "Dross-jabot" - This word seems to be compounded by Lawrence from dross + jabot = "a frill formerly worn by men on the front or bosom of the shirt edging the opening" (O.E.D.).

l. 61: "Huichilobos" - probably = Huitzilopochtli, the ancient Mexican wargod, see below, p. 1031.

H U M M I N G - B I R D

First published in *New Republic*, 11 May 1921; reprinted in *Nation* (New York) 10 October 1923, *The Bookman* (New York) January 1924, *BBF* and *CP*.

E A G L E I N N E W M E X I C O

For different version of this poem published in *FIRE*, see p. 780.

A N I M A L S

"'Yes and if oxen or lions . . . image of their several kinds,'" - this is a famous fragment of Xenophanes (No. 15). See Burnet, *op. cit.*, p. 119.

"'Once they say . . . heard its voice'" - this is a story told of Pythagoras by Xenophanes quoted by Burnet, *op. cit.*, p. 84.

"'Swine wash in mire . . . fowls in dust.'" - This is Burnet's translation of fragment 53 of Herakleitos, see Burnet, *op. cit.*, p. 137.

T H E A S S

l. 32: ". . . *noli me tangere*" - see John xx, 17.

l. 49: ". . . Jesus rode him . . ." - see Matthew xxi, 7 and John xii, 14.

S H E - G O A T

l. 13: "*Tace, tu, crapa, bestia!*" - Sicilian dialect for "Taci, tu, capra, bestia" = "Shut up, you she-goat, animal". *Crapa* is Sicilian dialect for *capra* by metathesis. We are indebted to Professor E. R. Vincent for this note.

i. 35: ". . . hairy horrid God the Father in a William Blake imagination." - Lawrence is almost certainly thinking of Blake's famous picture "The Ancient of Days" representing God the Father (Urizen-Jehovah), with streaming hair and beard, creating the world.

E L E P H A N T

First published in *The English Review*, April 1923; reprinted in *BBF* and *CP*. This was apparently the only poem written by Lawrence when he was in Ceylon in the spring of 1922. It describes the Pera-